



Objectives and Benefits of Senior Year Programs

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Since 1990, The National Resource Center for The Freshman Year Experience and Students in Transition has sponsored four national conferences entitled The Senior Year Experience (SYE) and devoted exclusively to that concept, plus two national conferences entitled Students in Transition that included the SYE as one of their three major strands. This chapter provides a descriptive synthesis of the proceedings of these conferences, intended to supply the reader with an introductory overview of the essential goals of SYE programming along with illustrative practices designed to achieve these goals. Goals and practices are enumerated in a quasi outline format so that the overarching objectives and pertinent practices of the SYE movement can be readily identified and potentially implemented.

This chapter concludes with a narrative review of major reasons why the SYE, a student-centered movement, can also realize a number of institution-centered goals that serve the college or university engaging in SYE programming. It is beyond the scope of this chapter to provide an evaluative critique of the practices cited. The institutional programs identified in this chapter were chosen because they clearly illustrate or implement a major goal or intended outcome of the SYE movement. Empirical evidence for a program's effectiveness is cited if such data were published in the proceedings of the conference at which the program was presented.

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PURPOSES AND GOALS

Review of the proceedings from The Senior Year Experience and Students in Transition conferences suggests that there are three major purposes of the SYE movement: (1) to bring *integration* and closure to the undergraduate experience, (2) to provide students with an opportunity to *reflect* on the meaning of their college experience, and (3) to facilitate graduating students' *transition* to postcollege life. More specifically, the SYE movement appears to be pursuing ten particular goals:

1. Promoting the coherence and relevance of *general education*
2. Promoting *integration* and connections between *general education* and the *academic major*
3. Fostering *integration* and synthesis *within the academic major*
4. Promoting meaningful connections between the *academic major* and *work (career)* experiences
5. Explicitly and intentionally developing important student *skills, competencies, and perspectives* that are tacitly or incidentally developed in the college curriculum (for example, leadership skills and character and values development)
6. Enhancing awareness of and support for the key personal *adjustments* encountered by seniors during their *transition from college to post-college life*
7. Improving seniors' *career* preparation and *preprofessional* development, that is, facilitating their transition from the academic to the professional world
8. Enhancing seniors' preparation and prospects for *postgraduate education*
9. Promoting effective *life planning and decision making* with respect to practical issues likely to be encountered in adult life after college (for example, financial planning, marriage, and family planning)
10. Encouraging a sense of *unity and community* among the senior class, which can serve as a foundation for later *alumni networking* and future *alumni support of the college*

The remainder of this chapter attempts to (1) delineate specific objectives embraced by the SYE movement with respect to each of the foregoing goals, (2) showcase some of the movement's exemplary programs, and (3) highlight the movement's major advantages for both the student and the institution.

Goal One: Coherence and Relevance of General Education

The major vehicle used by SYE programs to bring coherence and closure to the general education experience is the senior year capstone course, designed to forge interdisciplinary connections among the liberal arts and sciences.

For example, Plymouth State University (Plymouth, New Hampshire) offers such a course as a required component of its general education curriculum (Lambert, 1991). At St. Mary College (Leavenworth, Kansas), the integrative capstone course is taught by three interdisciplinary faculty teams (Brinkman, 1991), as it is at Meredith College (Raleigh, North Carolina), where an interdisciplinary capstone course is taught by a triad of faculty from the humanities, natural sciences, and social sciences (Hornak and Shiflett, 1990).

Southwestern College (Winfield, Kansas) requires its seniors to enroll in Capstone Course: Responsibilities for the Future, in which faculty from diverse academic fields make guest presentations that relate to assigned course readings. As a course requirement, students engage in volunteer service for the local community, and they collaborate on team projects with classmates who have different academic majors. The projects are presented in class, and other members of the campus and local community are invited to attend these group presentations (Findley, 1994).

Another SYE programming strategy for promoting the coherence and relevance of general education is to provide seniors with an interdisciplinary learning experience centered around a relevant, contemporary issue. The University of Hartford (Connecticut) provides its seniors with the interdisciplinary, team-taught course *Pluralism Revisited: Living with Diversity* (Luebke and D'Lugin, 1990).

Other institutions have linked a travel-study experience to a capstone interdisciplinary course, thus extending the course to incorporate an experiential, cross-cultural dimension. The University Studies/Weekend College Program at Wayne State University (Detroit, Michigan) offers travel-study experiences for its reentry (adult) seniors in conjunction with interdisciplinary course instruction (Wright and McMahn, 1990).

Goal Two: Integrating General Education and Academic Major

One SYE strategy for realizing the goal of integrating students' general education and their majors is to provide a curricular anchor at the end of the undergraduate experience, in order to (1) allow general education to be experienced across the curriculum, (2) integrate coursework in the students' major fields of study, and (3) connect liberal education with preprofessional training by having students apply general-education principles and perspectives to content taught within preprofessional majors.

Marietta College (Marietta, Ohio) requires a capstone course within every major for all graduating seniors, designed to promote integration between the student's major and general education (Hartel, 1993).

Goal Three: Synthesis Within Academic Major

SYE programming has attempted to realize this goal of synthesis by requiring a capstone course in the major that is designed to promote intradisciplinary connections. For instance, Eastern Illinois University, with an enrollment of some 11,300 students, requires such a capstone course in the major for all its seniors, offering some fifty different sections, one for each academic major offered by the college (Whitley, 1990).

Goal Four: Connecting Academic Major and Work World

A variety of SYE strategies have been developed to provide students with opportunities for connecting their academic major with the "real world" of work, serving to link coursework with experiential learning and professional practice. SYE strategies for integrating the academic major and the work world include the following institutional practices:

- Senior courses in which potential employers and alumni in various careers serve as guest speakers or as resources for out-of-class projects
- Business professionals serving on college advisory committees, or faculty serving on corporate advisory committees
- Faculty development programs in which corporate professionals and faculty attempt to promote *positive transfer* between students' academic experience within their majors (for example, departmental curriculum and pedagogy) and their work experience in corporate organizations
- Research conducted jointly by faculty and business professionals (for example, joint data collection on the relationship between students' academic and professional performance; collaborative research on the relationship between specific college experiences and career success)
- *Linked* courses in the senior year designed to integrate theory and practice (for example, internship experience and senior seminar taken concurrently, which involves joint planning, coordinated topics, and mutually reinforcing assignments)
- Interorganizational exchanges between college faculty and corporate professionals that are designed to promote mutual understanding and appreciation of their respective practices

Goal Five: Developing Student Skills, Competencies, and Perspectives

Senior year programs have been consciously designed to promote the development of numerous student qualities.

Leadership skills are developed by means of special coursework, mentoring, and experiential activities. Regis College (Denver) offers an interdisciplinary course focusing on leadership that is reinforced with a series of out-of-class developmental experiences, including "outdoor challenges" (Jutras, 1990).

At the University of North Carolina, a senior year retreat is provided for selected students in the university's leadership program. During the retreat, students review and reflect on their leadership self-assessments reported during the freshman year and the leadership experiences they have had during their first three years in college. Seniors articulate how their leadership style compares and contrasts with the first-year assessments, how their style of leadership has evolved over the four years at the university, and how they see it in relation to their future leadership roles after college (Johnson and Edgerly, 1993).

At Purdue University, the Student as Mentor program has been developed, in which a senior (1) delivers an experiential leadership presentation to local high school students, (2) hosts potential first-year students during campus visits, (3) becomes a formal mentor for an incoming freshman, and (4) selects and trains college juniors to become the following year's senior mentors (Lybrook, 1995).

Character and values development are fostered by having seniors critically explore the ethical implications and consequences of decisions they will be making in their professional careers and personal lives after college.

Holy Family College (Philadelphia) offers a senior ethics course involving faculty and students from all disciplines that focuses on values education and applied ethics. The course is designed to assist students in establishing a foundation for decision making with respect to moral issues likely to be encountered in life after college (Hobaugh and McCormick, 1990).

Incarnate Word College (San Antonio) offers a senior capstone course in practical ethics that includes an "ethical court" in which students role-play defendants, prosecutors, and judges in ethical cases involving relationships, work, and political situations that may be encountered in postcollege settings (Doyle and Galloway, 1991).

The ability to work in small groups is developed by way of teamwork, problem-solving, consensus-building, and decision-making skills applied to real-world situations or issues.

At Keuka College (Keuka Park, New York), "team case-analyses" are conducted by small groups of students in its capstone management course (Breitling, 1991).

At Villa Julie College (Stevenson, Maryland), the capstone seminar teams up three or four seniors with different majors and personality profiles (as assessed by the MBTI) who then work together on tasks that require consensus building and decision making (Ellis, 1993).

Writing skills are promoted via the senior thesis, oral communication skills via oral reports and small-group exercises and projects. At the University of Wisconsin-Green Bay, each graduating senior is required to complete a major project or paper relating to a key issue in the senior seminar and is expected to demonstrate effective writing skills, small-group discussion skills, and formal speaking skills (Murphy, 1991).

Discipline-specific communication skills are developed, as in mastering the distinctive written and oral presentation styles peculiar to the student's major or professional field (for example, the business memo).

At Villa Julie College, all business administration majors are required to take the Senior Research Seminar in which they apply information search-and-retrieval skills to investigate a contemporary issue relating to business. Special emphasis is placed on the development of discipline-specific writing styles and oral presentation skills, which students use to present their research findings for critique by peers, faculty from business and other disciplines, and members of the business community (Ellis, 1993).

Goal Six: Enhancing Personal Adjustments

Toward the realization of this SYE goal, Mount Saint Mary's College (Emmitsburg, Maryland) has developed a self-assessment instrument (the Transition Style Indicator, or TSI) that is used to increase seniors' awareness of their "transition style" and its impact on how they handle transition to new situations (Beitz, 1993).

The University of Mississippi offers a senior-year transition course in which a needs assessment is administered on the first day of class in order to assess the work experiences and career knowledge of students enrolled in the course. The results of this assessment are used to modify the course syllabus in order to more effectively meet the particular needs of the enrolled students and to serve as a pretest against which posttest results are compared after course completion to show students how much personal insight and career-related knowledge they have acquired during the course (Nichols and Hood, 1993).

At Boston College, focus-group interviews are conducted with seniors who are asked open-ended questions designed to gather information on their final-year experience. Drawing on the ideas expressed during these interviews, senior year programming is planned by The Senior Year Experience Committee (comprising student development staff, college faculty, and currently enrolled seniors) with the intention of better meeting the transitional needs of graduating students. For instance, one planned program consists of a weeklong

dinner series titled Senior Week: From Backpack to Briefcase, provided for seniors in response to their expressed need for a forum where they could discuss personal questions and concerns about their upcoming transition (Morgan and Armstrong, 1993).

Similarly, at the University of Maryland, the Senior Council has been established as a student organization for the purpose of providing information services and activities that are designed to "unify the graduating class and cultivate alumni involvement" (Van der Veer, Gast, Schmidt, and Lucas, 1993).

Goal Seven: Improving Career Preparation and Preprofessional Development

This general preparation and development aim of the SYE movement embraces a number of more specific objectives and practices.

Students can be helped to articulate a realistic, clearly defined career plan and a commitment to actualizing the short- and long-term goals of that plan. Kean College of New Jersey offers its seniors an elective course, Career Management, that requires them to complete a term paper including (1) personal reflection and response to the results of individual aptitude and interest tests administered by the college's career service center, (2) self-description of employment qualifications, and (3) a detailed plan for achieving career objectives (Casson, 1993).

Students' perspectives of a "career" can be broadened so that it is perceived as a lifelong activity involving continual choices and continuing educational or professional development (for example, via reading professional literature, participating in professional development workshops and seminars, becoming actively involved in professional associations and organizations).

At the University of California-Santa Barbara, the Professional Self career-counseling model developed for seniors describes career planning as an evolving process of "becoming" that continues throughout their professional lives. Students are equipped with an information package for lifetime career decision making that they can use at any point in their careers, returning to it whenever they need to reassess their work roles and make changes (Maestas, 1991).

At Presbyterian College (Clinton, South Carolina), a "transition module" has been developed to promote student awareness that first jobs are just the starting point of a lifelong career management and development process. The transition module is organized around the acronym PERFORM, a mnemonic for seven key elements of this lifelong process:

P = planning your career, a continuous process

E = education; it is not completed at graduation because lifelong learning is required to keep a career on track

R = relationships, which are essential to career development, so it is important to continuously build a network of contacts

FO = future opportunities, which must be monitored proactively so changes in career responsibilities and demand can be anticipated

R = reinvention, necessary for coping with change and developing flexible, transferable skills

M = marketing, important to be able to sell yourself to current and potential employers in order to maintain career mobility (Dupuy, 1996)

Practical experience can be gained through off-campus cooperative education, internships, field experiences, and work-shadowing opportunities that are built into or linked with an on-campus course, thereby providing students with a regular forum for discussing their off-campus learning experiences.

For instance, at Pine Manor College (Chestnut Hill, Massachusetts), internship students also enroll concurrently in a course with other interning students of the same major, during which time they come together to reflect on and discuss their internship or cooperative education experiences (Kutakoff, 1991).

Employment search-and-location strategies can be developed (for example, networking skills). At the University of the Pacific (Stockton, California), all students in the school of engineering are required to take the Professional Practice Seminar during the semester immediately preceding their first term in an off-campus, full-time co-op program. This course is taught by full-time faculty and covers a wide range of topics including résumé development, company profile research, personal job-search skills, and mock-interview exercises (Martin and Rosselli, 1996).

At Queens College (New York City) the basic elements of corporate outplacement career counseling and training services (traditionally designed to assist executives with career transitions) have been adapted and incorporated within an existing senior-level course (Simpson, 1994). Specific employment preparation and self-presentation skills can be learned (for example, résumé writing, interviewing skills, business etiquette).

At Slippery Rock University (Slippery Rock, Pennsylvania), students engage in videotaped "mock interviews" that are each evaluated by outside professionals from whatever career field the student intends to pursue (Walters and Hart, 1991).

Potential "job shock" can be reduced and students can be better prepared to function effectively in the real world of work by having students engage in simulated work situations. In the capstone course for business majors offered at the Mississippi University for Women (Columbus), the class is divided into small groups that simulate management teams of subsidiaries within a corporate conglomerate (W. Smith, 1991).

Mount Saint Mary's College (Emmitsburg, Maryland) offers a senior-seminar capstone course for business majors that simulates a business organization, Excellence Unlimited Incorporated. In this course, students are required to inter-

view at least one practicing senior manager in a corporate organization and then provide their boss (instructor) with a desk-side briefing and memorandum concerning their interview findings. The briefing is videotaped for later review by the students, who have been equipped with evaluative criteria for self-assessment. A number of video case studies of real workplace situations are also analyzed by students, and a panel of practicing managers comes to class for a discussion of what is expected of new professionals in the workplace (Beitz, 1993).

At Virginia State University, the Seminar in Marketing, consisting of three major units, is offered for seniors. The first unit of the course, Marketing and the Organization, provides students with a simulated corporate experience by structuring the class as a corporate organization; students then apply and interview for various positions within this organization. The class works with a real client (typically, a local business) to develop and assist in the implementation of a marketing plan.

The second unit of the course, Marketing and the Entrepreneur, requires each student to prepare a comprehensive business plan that is then presented to a panel of faculty and entrepreneurs for evaluation and feedback. The final unit, Marketing and the Self, involves investigation of an area of marketing that the student is interested in pursuing as a possible career. This requires each student to research a company of interest and prepare a letter of application and résumé specifically tailored to that particular company (Stitts, 1994).

At the University of South Carolina, journalism students enroll in the Senior Semester Experience in Journalism program during one of their final two semesters. As a capstone experience designed to prepare them for the real world of work in their chosen profession, seniors take a twelve-hour block of courses, during which time they produce a weekly newspaper. Students who graduate from this program with the intention of pursuing a career in newspaper journalism have a placement rate of almost 100 percent (Campbell and Turk, 1993).

At the University of Cincinnati, seniors majoring in engineering design take a capstone course culminating in creation of a design product (hardware, software, or both) that attempts to solve a real-world engineering problem. The course spans three terms. In the first term, students shape the design proposal; during the second term, the focus is research and design, resulting in a written design report; and the third term focuses on fabrication, testing, and debugging, eventuating in a formal presentation at a "product expo" attended by students, faculty, and members of the industry. The content of this presentation is eventually catalogued in the college library (Kreppel and Arthur, 1994).

Students can be familiarized with corporate life and culture by exposing them to practicing or retired business professionals who may serve as role models or career mentors for senior students. At the University of Minnesota-Duluth, each business student works with a retired executive on special projects (Falk, 1991). At the University of Idaho, The World of Corporate Business is offered as an

elective course for students in all majors; it features guest presentations by fifteen to twenty corporate executives from leading firms in the Pacific Northwest (for example, Boeing, Hewlett-Packard, and Albertson's). Senior executives and CEOs selected from corporations with exemplary records on social issues discuss topics relating to management ethics and corporate social responsibility; students also have the opportunity to visit with these executives at luncheons and dinners. In addition to interacting with students, the visiting executives meet with interested faculty—who have found the meetings useful for keeping abreast of current business developments—and with administrators who use meeting time to apprise corporate leaders of current campus developments (Toomey, 1993).

Goal Eight: Enhancing Preparation for Postgraduate Education

Institutional practices that illustrate pursuit of this goal include the SYE program at American University (Washington, D.C.), where seniors in the School of International Service are linked with a beginning graduate student in the same school who has just gone through the process of applying to graduate school and gaining acceptance (Levinson and Skillings, 1993).

At Cazenovia College (Cazenovia, New York), the senior year experience embraces a two-semester sequence, the first of which offers the Senior Project class. The projects developed by students in this class lead directly to the Senior Seminar course, which is taken the following term. The latter class provides an opportunity for students to present their research in a setting that simulates a professional conference, but which is organized, promoted, and conducted entirely by the students (Buffalo, McLaughlin, Majorey, and Olin-Ammentorp, 1993).

At the University of California-Irvine, the Pregraduate Mentorship Program has been developed as a strategy for increasing the number of minority and women students in graduate school who may eventually become college faculty. The program provides students with stipends (\$1,000–\$3,000) for participating in faculty-sponsored research projects during the summer preceding their senior year and throughout their senior year. The research projects culminate with the Student Research Conference, at which time the seniors present their research to an audience of peers, faculty, and other members of the university community.

An additional element of the program is an elective two-unit course on contemporary postgraduate education in the United States, including such topics as GRE history and test-taking strategies, the graduate-school application process, and the graduate student experience. As a final component of the course, seniors complete a graduate school application and an accompanying statement of purpose (Martinez, 1993).

Goal Nine: Promoting Practical Life Planning and Decision Making

This broad-based goal of the SYE movement incorporates several specifically focused objectives and practices.

Financial planning can be encouraged (renting an apartment versus purchasing a home, budgeting, purchasing insurance, making savings and investments, effectively using credit, and developing a comprehensive financial plan). Assumption College (Worcester, Massachusetts) provides its seniors with *The Last Six Weeks Survival Handbook*, which is designed to provide students with practical suggestions for independent living after college (McCoy and Barnard, 1990).

Planning can be stimulated for active citizenship and community involvement (voting, governance, volunteerism). At American University, the Senior International Experience attempts to institutionalize students' commitment to service, through either part-time volunteer activities or full-time service (for example, the Peace Corps). This experience is designed to parallel the university's Freshman International Experience, which introduces beginning college students to volunteer opportunities relating to the study of international affairs (Levinson and Skillings, 1993).

Planning for lifelong learning (for example, developing strategies for continuing educational, personal, and professional development) can be encouraged. At Indiana University-South Bend, all seniors in the general studies degree program take a capstone course by the end of which they construct a written assessment of their academic work at the university and a future plan for lifelong learning that includes planning for career development, graduate study, and personal enrichment (Hengesbach, 1996).

Opportunities can be provided for "reality-testing" before leaving college by exposing students to realistic postcollege life experiences (for example, in-class simulations and role playing of soon to-be-encountered life situations). The Career Center of the University of Mississippi uses alumni programs to orient students to life after graduation. Seniors hear firsthand accounts of the post-collegiate experiences of alumni and acquire experience-driven advice about how to develop postcollege "life skills" (Busby and Nichols, 1996).

Goal Ten: Encouraging Sense of Unity and Community as Future Alumni

One institutional practice that illustrates pursuit of this SYE goal is a program initiated in 1994 at the Johns Hopkins University (Baltimore) and called Disorientation. It includes a collection of senior seminars complemented by a year-round series of social events (luncheons, dinners, "pub nights"), held on campus and off, designed to provide settings for seniors to meet and reunite

with classmates, faculty administrators, and alumni (Boswell, Fraitcs, and Poonawala, 1995).

HOW THE SENIOR YEAR EXPERIENCE BENEFITS THE INSTITUTION

As the ten foregoing goals and related practices strongly suggest, the SYE is a student-centered movement, the purpose of which is to support students in transition from college to postcollege life. However, graduating students may not be the sole beneficiaries of vigorous, comprehensive SYE programming. Such programming also has great potential for benefiting the institution itself. There are larger organizational goals and significant contemporary issues facing higher education that may be more effectively addressed by institutions making a strong commitment to the senior year experience.

Improving College-Business Relations

The SYE can stimulate partnerships between members of the college community and corporate employers on the issue of how to better prepare college graduates for work-related roles. A good illustration of such a partnership is at Kennesaw State University (Marietta, Georgia), where members of the management and marketing faculty have teamed with business leaders in both line and staff areas of corporate organizations to research and identify first those behaviors and skills demonstrated by graduates that differentiate effective from less-effective job performance and second how students could be exposed to and practice effective job-performance behavior while still in college (Lasher and Brush, 1990).

These sorts of partnerships serve to foster a more harmonious, collaborative relationship between the college and its corporate neighbors. This is a desirable end in itself, serving to improve college-community ("town-gown") relations, and it also may serve to lay the groundwork needed for securing future fiscal support from the business sector (for example, corporate funding for minority scholarships or paid internships).

The 3M Company (St. Paul, Minnesota) has provided such fiscal support by collaborating with the Minnesota State University system to develop the Minority Exposure to Corporate America (MECA) program. Designed for students of color who have achieved junior status in the state university system, the program has four major components: (1) \$1,000 scholarships for MECA students that are awarded to them in both their junior and senior years of college, (2) paid internships at 3M for MECA students during the summer between their junior and senior years, (3) leadership development seminars for MECA stu-

dents throughout their junior and senior years, which are jointly conducted by university faculty and 3M professionals, and (4) mentoring relationships between MECA students and 3M professionals who share similar cultural backgrounds and career goals (Beagle and Johnson, 1991).

Improving Alumni Relations

The SYE has encouraged alumni to become actively involved with their alma mater as career mentors for college seniors, guest speakers in the senior seminar, and consultants or advisors to faculty on matters concerning the relevance of the college curriculum to postcollege careers.

Departing graduates who have had a meaningful senior year experience may be expected to become more loyal alumni as a result of this positive last impression of their college, one in which the college conveys a final message of caring about what happens to its students after they cease to function as tuition-paying, revenue-generating customers. Such a final measure of support for departing seniors could yield more satisfied alumni who, by word of mouth, may become more effective recruiters for the college and, perhaps, more generous donors to their alma mater.

Empirical support for this contention is provided by preliminary research findings gathered at the University of Maryland, which suggest that increased institutional attention to serving the needs of graduating seniors results in improving their expectations of future success and promotes their ongoing commitment to the college as alumni (Van der Veer, Gast, Schmidt, and Lucas, 1993).

Promoting Faculty Development

The SYE has encouraged faculty to step beyond the boundaries of their circumscribed disciplines to collaborate with faculty from different academic areas (for example, via interdisciplinary team-teaching of the senior seminar) and professionals outside of academe (as in dialogue and cooperative education ventures with business professionals).

Forging Alliances Between Academic and Student Affairs

The senior seminar course has served to reduce the persistent gap between academic and student affairs by promoting communication, cooperation, and synergy among members in these historically separate units of the campus (for example, team-teaching unites college faculty and student development professionals in the areas of career preparation and leadership development, and guest lectures and workshops can be provided by student development professionals in faculty-taught senior seminars).

A good illustration of the partnership potential of SYE programming is the annual three-day career development conference offered by Elon College (Elon

College, North Carolina). Entitled *Beyond Elon: Transition Tactics*, this senior year transition program involves a working partnership that embraces student development professionals, college faculty, and community members from the local chamber of commerce who come together to jointly plan, organize, and deliver a comprehensive program for college seniors (Thompson, Highsmith, and Brumbaugh, 1993).

Enhancing Institutional Research and Student Assessment

As part of a comprehensive SYE program, student opinion or satisfaction surveys (senior surveys, graduating-student questionnaires) or graduating-student interviews could be administered for purposes of assessing final-year students' retrospective perceptions of the institution's key programs or services, their overall satisfaction with the college experience, and their future educational and professional plans. A profile of student persisters can be compiled from these assessments, which might then be compared with the results of exit interviews or surveys of students who have withdrawn from the college. These comparisons may uncover important differences between the perspectives of students who have completed college and those who have not.

Outcomes assessment also becomes more logistically feasible if it is conducted within the context of a capstone course, because there is a captive audience available for student assessment, thus circumventing the potential hassle and sampling bias associated with soliciting volunteers to come at their own time and expense. For example, King's College (Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania) has capitalized on this data-gathering potential of capstone courses by requiring all seniors to complete a faculty-constructed assessment instrument within one of their required major courses. This instrument is designed to assess discipline-specific knowledge and methodology as well as the liberal-learning skills of the graduating class (O'Hara, 1994). Similarly, the University of Nevada-Reno has integrated assessment of general education and assessment of the major within its senior year capstone courses (Nichols, 1994).

Moreover, if equivalent or parallel assessment instruments are used in both the freshman and senior seminars, then the resulting entry and exit data may be used to conduct *value-added* or *talent development* assessment, that is, to assess the degree of positive student change or development from the beginning to the end of the undergraduate experience. The University of North Carolina's leadership program approximates this assessment practice by having seniors reassess their leadership qualities relative to the self-assessments they reported during their freshman year (Johnson and Edgerly, 1993). Similarly, at Indiana University-South Bend, students in the general studies program take a "threshold course" during their freshman year in which they develop a written plan for integrating the university's curriculum and objectives with their personal goals and educational objectives. This same cohort of students takes a capstone

course during the senior year, in which the students reflect upon and assess their educational experience at the university relative to the goals they initially articulated in their freshman-year threshold course (Hengesbach, 1996).

Also, as part of the capstone course, a senior thesis, senior project, senior portfolio, or senior self-assessment could be required and used as a source of outcomes assessment. For instance, St. Mary College (Leavenworth, Kansas) requires a final senior product defined as a "culminating performance, exhibit, or portfolio" (Brinkman, 1991). In its outcomes assessment of students majoring in education, Kean College includes three key components: a student portfolio, defined as a collection of documents and records from professional education courses and field experiences within the student's major; a written self-assessment by the student in response to her or his own portfolio; and a graduating-student interview (Prince, 1991).

Slippery Rock University uses off-campus professionals as assessors to evaluate the culminating portfolios of their communication majors (Walters and Hart, 1991). Copies of these final senior products might be saved for institutional research purposes (for example, to compare the quality of products generated by seniors before the introduction of a new institutional program or educational intervention with the products generated by seniors after the program or intervention has been implemented and experienced by its students).

Also, outcomes assessment of *alumni* could be conducted to evaluate graduating students' initial job placements, eventual career positions, and acceptance rates and performance levels at graduate or professional schools. The impact of specific senior year experience programs on these outcomes could be included as part of the institution's alumni assessment efforts. Michigan State University has engaged in such longitudinal research with its alumni and found that seniors who participated in its internship program had significantly higher rates of career placement and satisfaction than students who did not participate in its senior year internship program (Gardner, 1991).

However, it is noteworthy that two types of alumni assessment have received little attention at The Senior Year Experience and Students in Transition national conferences: preparation of seniors for graduate school, and preparation of adult students for reentry into the workforce. The paucity of conference papers pertaining to these types of transitional experiences suggests either they have yet to be carefully assessed or their assessment has remained at the level of local campus-specific institutional research and has not yet been shared systematically at national conferences sponsored by the National Resource Center for The Freshman Year Experience and Students in Transition. In either case, with increasing public demands for institutional accountability and more frequent questioning of the value of a college education, the need to conduct and communicate student outcomes assessment for the full range of postcollege outcomes and for key student subpopulations has become a national issue in

higher education. Conducting such assessment as an integral component of a comprehensive senior year experience may represent a viable and timely institutional response to this national issue. (See Chapter Fifteen by Karl and Karen Schilling for additional detailed discussion of the senior year.)

CONCLUSION

The senior year experience has the potential for making significant contributions to four key areas of contemporary concern in American higher education:

1. The curriculum: by bringing needed coherence to both general education and the academic major, and greater connection between the college curriculum and the world of work
2. Student development: by fostering student growth in three areas that have been given relatively short shrift in postsecondary education: character, leadership, and teamwork
3. Campus community: by forging alliances between two key educational forces in the college community (academic affairs and student development) and by promoting partnerships between the college and two key members of its extended community (alumni and the corporate executives who employ its graduates)
4. Institutional accountability and quality: by providing a logistically feasible vehicle and context for outcomes assessment or for the exit component for value-added (talent development) assessment

Institutions may be reluctant to initiate or expand SYE programming, because at first glance it appears to be a high-cost, low-benefit endeavor that involves expenditure of institutional resources on departing students who will no longer be contributing to the institution's revenue base. However, the potential institutional advantages associated with SYE programming suggest that institutional commitment to the senior year experience is more likely to be an act of self-service than of self-sacrifice.

Most important, however, the senior year experience represents the institution's *last chance* to do something positive for its students. Moreover, if the senior year experience is combined with a substantive freshman year experience, the tandem can provide a meaningful introduction and conclusion to college life, serving to anchor the undergraduate experience with symmetrical support at its two most critical transition points, thus ensuring that students get this support both "coming and going."