

REPORT OF THE SENIOR YEAR COMMITTEE
March, 2005

INTRODUCTION

The Senior Year Committee was constituted by Provost Mahler in the fall of 2004 and met regularly late that quarter and throughout the winter quarter of 2005. The special impetus for the formation of this committee was concern raised by results of the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), which revealed a pattern over several years of Kalamazoo seniors rating the college particularly low, compared with the ratings of those at other four-year liberal arts colleges, in the composite measure of “supportive campus environment.” (On the other composite measures—level of academic challenge, active and collaborative learning, student-faculty interaction, and enriching educational experiences—“K” students’ ratings were considerably above the norm.) Of the specific items comprising the “supportive campus environment” measure, seniors at “K” were particularly likely to express dissatisfaction with regard to the campus providing “support to thrive socially” and to “the quality of relationships with administrative personnel and offices,” although our students were below the norm on the following items as well: “campus environment helps you cope with your non-academic responsibilities (work, family, etc.)” and “quality of relationships with other students.” But these NSSE results were not the only warning signs. As noted in the recent Self-Study Report, the 2002 HEDS (Higher Education Data Sharing) Senior Survey found that 45 percent of “K” seniors were “very” or “generally” dissatisfied with the “sense of community” here, as were 40 percent with “social life on campus.” Such high levels of dissatisfaction on these items were not found at most of the four “comparison” colleges in this study, and in some cases the differences were dramatic.

Such evidence suggests that more informal indicators of malaise among “K” seniors should not be brushed aside as mere carping of a disgruntled few. The senior year at the college (often essentially starting in the junior spring) *is* extraordinarily and sometimes unrelentingly demanding and stressful. While the quarter system and the college’s academic rigor no doubt generate an unusually intense experience for “K” students *in general*, such intensity and its consequences come to a head in the senior year, given post-study abroad readjustment, advanced study in the major, the SIP, comprehensive examinations, and preparation for (or at least anxiety about) life after “K.” The claims on energy and time all this creates, coupled with students living off campus, do affect the quality of social life and community. Our committee’s charge was to examine the senior year experience to determine more specifically the kinds of problems students perceive and/or encounter and to identify effective responses to these problems.

The core of our committee’s work consisted of the following activities:

- Drawing not simply on the evidence noted above but our own diverse experiences as, or working with, seniors and, most importantly, on conversations with groups of seniors, delineating the range and variety of problem areas. (One of the most

widespread observations of students, aside from a general sense of stress, concerned the lack of time, or at least perceived lack of time, to think carefully about and take action on post-graduate plans.)

- Examining ways in which certain departments (psychology, biology, English) have been particularly intentional and successful in creating clear, challenging, and socially supportive majors programs, as one form of providing helpful structure coupled with a sense of community at the department level.
- Surveying departments to learn more about SIP and comprehensive exam expectations and calendars, as well as seminars, in order to ascertain the degree to which the academic pattern of the senior year is shared across majors. (Answer: the variety of approaches and schedules is enormous.)
- Learning more about several other colleges. The primary focus was on Carleton, given its combination of academic rigor, a quarter system, and yet seemingly upbeat senior year experience. (One whole meeting was devoted to hearing from an especially thoughtful member of Carleton's Class of 2004.) But some attention was given to Wooster and Kenyon as well. One of the important messages we learned from this comparison is that "K" seems unique in having two senior capstone requirements, i.e. the SIP and the comprehensive examination.
- Examining and discussing the current set of organized senior activities, noting that *part* of the problem is not a dearth of such activities, though we think more are needed, but the absence of an easily accessible senior year calendar.

The recommendations that follow are organized around a set of problems either directly identified by seniors or inferred by the committee from listening to seniors and to one another. Before turning to these recommendations, however, let us add three final points. First, one aspect of the senior year virtually all seniors respect and defend is the SIP, and that confirmed our "going-in" position that we would not recommend the elimination of this core element of the "K Plan." Second, it is quite likely that part of the reason for the weak sense of community among seniors rests in the fact that they live off campus. Yet due both to limited residence hall space and to the nearly universal message we got from seniors that they do not want to live in the residence halls, we have not recommended this seemingly obvious solution. Finally, some of the negativity we hear from students, whether directly or through surveys, may be a reflection of a more fundamental "culture of complaint" at the college—of a kind of norm that one *should* be stressed out, overworked, and critical—and to the extent such a culture exists, it will be largely impervious to most of our recommendations. But it also must be recalled from the NSSE and other surveys that students are quite *positive* about much of their experience at "K," clearly suggesting that their concerns are rooted in far more than a generalized grouchiness. Indeed, we believe these are real and serious issues, deserving of broad attention and prompt, thoughtful action.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Problem: Seniors not sufficiently involved on campus.

Recommendations:

- a. Provide more gathering spaces on campus, large and small, giving seniors a place to see each other, as well as see faculty, staff, and students in other classes.
 - b. Give seniors access to residence halls.
 - c. Provide at least one meal ticket a week to seniors or, at a minimum, create a special discounted senior rate for one or more such tickets per week.
 - d. Institute more all-campus gatherings and more all-senior campus events. For example, each division could have a quarterly party or other gathering for all its senior (or junior and senior) majors, with divisional faculty attending.
 - e. Create senior leadership/mentorship positions (e.g. departmental student advisors, peer mentors, etc.) and institute a graduated pay scale for those positions that are paid.
2. Problem: Seniors unaware of or uninformed about the full spectrum of senior year activities and expectations.

Recommendations:

- a. Develop senior year calendar (including all senior department events open to the public).
 - b. Each department provide calendar of all senior events, expectations, and due dates.
3. Problem: Post study abroad let-down and loss of identification with the college.

Recommendations:

- a. Encourage all juniors to come back to campus three days before the beginning of the spring term. This would be a time to share study abroad (and other) experiences, enjoy an internationally diverse menu in the cafeteria, be “caught up” on what’s happened on campus, and even get some early post-graduate advice from the Center for Career Development. Seniors with experience in various study abroad sites could serve as organizers and peer leaders during these days.
- b. If at all relevant, incorporate sections building on study abroad into junior seminars when these exist.

- c. Think of post-study abroad quarters as the “year of the major” and develop within departments a clear plan of study and activities (with calendar), including good support structures and social occasions. In this regard, should organize sessions for faculty to hear about some current “best practices,” e.g. psychology and biology.
- d. Consider team-taught senior-only course(s), e.g. “America in the World,” that would also satisfy various general education requirements.

4. Problem: Irritating procedural hassles

Recommendations:

- a. Avoid the “senior audit” dilemma by having an on-line workable audit system for general education beginning with day one.
- b. Make available clear, easy procedures for students to organize events, get recreational and other equipment, etc. We want to send the message that we *encourage* such student initiatives by making this simple.
- c. Create a “Class Dean” system. This would be, for each class, an ombudsman of sorts, a trouble-shooter, a liaison with various parts of the college, a “go to” person. Ideally, each class could have its own dean, who would follow the class through the four years. This would not necessarily require four different deans; two individuals, were this part of their job description, could alternate classes.
- d. Eliminate unnecessary restrictions or regulations. For example, don’t require that those seniors living in residence halls must be out by 5 PM on the day of commencement. This requirement simply makes an already busy time even more frantic and sends seniors off with even more of a sense that the college is obsessed with petty rules. Or, as another example, don’t insist that seniors (or others, for that matter) must obtain their advisors’ signatures on drop/add forms for physical education classes.

5. Problem: Senior year is too full of stress points.

Recommendations:

- a. Institutionalize, within each department, a systematic process of post-graduate planning during the fall quarter. While this actually *adds* an element to the senior year, it would reduce the nagging and debilitating anxiety that “I should be doing this but don’t have time.”
- b. Consider as a faculty, starting with EPC in consultation with department chairs, whether to eliminate the comprehensive exam *as a college requirement*, with departments having the option of requiring one or another form of a comprehensive exam for their majors. The effect would be to make the SIP *the* college-wide senior capstone experience.

6. Problem: Few opportunities for celebration.

Recommendations:

- a. Arrange with all departments that all SIPs (final drafts) and comprehensive exams be completed no later than the middle of the spring quarter. (This is substantially the case now.) Then declare week 6 or 7 of the spring quarter a time of all-campus celebration for and with seniors, with some appropriate and merry ritual on the quad.
- b. Revise the spring (at least) exam schedule, such that exams are completed no later than Tuesday. (Carleton, e.g., has exams on Saturdays and Sundays to achieve this.) Then turn the rest of the pre-commencement week over to senior activities and celebration, ranging from the formal (award ceremonies, concerts or recitals, etc.) to fun and games.
- c. Rearrange commencement weekend to make it more possible for seniors (and their families) to celebrate with faculty and staff *after* the commencement ceremony. One model (a version of Kenyon's) would involve department open houses on Friday afternoon (instead of our breakfasts on Saturday), commencement on Saturday morning, and then a leisurely picnic for all on the quad after commencement.

It is possible that some of the problems facing seniors (and other students) might be reduced or more effectively responded to with more basic structural changes. Two of these were mentioned in our deliberations: a variable credit system and a change to semesters or a 4-1-4 system. While we do not necessarily recommend these, we think discussion of such changes would be timely.

Committee:

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