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ABSTRACT

In 1997, John N. Gardner, Gretchen Van der Veer and associates published their landmark book, *The Senior Year Experience: Facilitating Integration, Reflection, Closure, and Transition*. One impact of this book, and the Senior Year Experience program within the National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition at the University of South Carolina at Columbia, was to motivate student affairs professionals and career counselors to create a university-wide course for seniors to help prepare them for the major transition of leaving college and successfully entering the world of work. This paper outlines how such a life-skill course was designed and conducted based on 4 years experience of teaching the course at a large southeastern research university. (GCP)

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# The Senior Experience: A Transition to the World of Work

by

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# The Senior Experience: A Transition to the World of Work

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## Introduction

In 1997, John N. Gardner, Gretchen Van der Veer and associates published their landmark book, *The Senior Year Experience: Facilitating Integration, Reflection, Closure, and Transition*. One impact of this book, and the Senior Year Experience program within the National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition at the University of South Carolina at Columbia, was to motivate student affairs professionals and this career counselor, specifically, to create a university-wide course for seniors to help prepare them for the major transition of leaving college and successfully entering the world of work. This paper will outline how such a life-skill course was designed and conducted based on four years of experience of teaching the course at a large southeastern research university.

## The Senior Experience

Cuseo (1997) listed ten goals for the Senior Year Experience movement of which a Senior Year Experience course would be just one supporting element:

1. Promoting the coherence and relevance of general education.
2. Promoting integration and connection 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, which are tacitly or incidentally developed in the college curriculum (for example, leadership skills, 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 senior career preparation and pre-professional development, that is to say, facilitating their transition from the academic to the professional world.
8. Enhancing seniors' preparation and prospects for post-graduate 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.

Many of these goals support the notion of offering a special course for seniors. Student affairs and career development specialists have a body of knowledge and expertise for which they are perfectly prepared to teach that which support Cuseo's (1997) goals six, seven, eight and nine. This also provides an appropriate opportunity for career counselors to build bridges with students and the general faculty by teaching such a course. However, perhaps the most important reasons for offering a course like The Senior Year Experience are the tremendous demand by students for developing career skills, and the effectiveness and efficiency of providing a course to teach such skills.

This paper will discuss the strategy for the course, its syllabus, and the methods used to teach and facilitate the course. It is hoped that this paper will encourage and support student affairs professionals, especially career development specialists and counselors to develop and offer similar psycho-educational courses at their colleges and universities.

The central focus of the Senior Year Experience course is on the practical, developmental, and psychological elements experienced during a successful transition from life as an undergraduate student to the life of a citizen/worker. Emphasis is placed upon integrating academic experiences into post-graduate plans of employment and life beyond college. An intensive career planning process is used to expand self-awareness, and develop self-marketing techniques into plans for successful employment and career goals after college. The course uses a holistic dimension of practical issues that deal with the process of leaving college that include personal, social, vocational, political, civic, financial, and psychological elements.

The goals of the course are to enable the student to:

1. Prepare for the process of transition during and after their senior year, including examination of individual developmental issues such as personal, social, vocational, financial, political, civic, spiritual, physical, and psychological.
2. Understand and implement the components of a structured career development and planning process.
3. Demonstrate improved writing and speaking skills in assignments of both an academic and professional nature.
4. Work as an effective member of a team to analyze, evaluate and decide the best courses of action, when confronted with difficult problems.
5. Organize, monitor team progress, and present their work to their peers for critical review and discussion.
6. Evaluate the practical issues facing graduating seniors through a series of seminars conducted by practicing professionals in areas such as deciding where to live, and work; buy or rent a home, automobile and insurance; alumni involvement and responsibilities; adapting to the first year on the job; traveling for business and pleasure; managing wellness; and how best to adapt to new relationships and lifestyles, and

7. Prepare a professional portfolio, resume and cover letter and successfully interview for their career position of choice.

The major course requirements are:

1. Each student is expected to read all assigned readings prior to class, and to be prepared to participate in discussions, and in the question, answer, and evaluation portions of presentations by fellow students, as well as with guest speakers.

- a. Each student presents a five-minute summary of an article to the class on a topic related to transitions or career development after college. An additional 5 minutes are used to discuss the implications of the article and to answer questions. Two class days are used near the end of the course for these presentations, and these classes have become one of the highlights of the course as students expound on the major points emphasized in the course. This has become a wonderful way to bring closure to the course, and to summarize all that has been learned during the semester.

- b. Due to the fact that this course is highly interactive and a variety of topics are covered, participation and class attendance are mandatory, and assessed daily. In addition, when guest speakers are invited, these professionals are giving of their time and expertise to visit with the class. For this reason, students are expected to participate by being prepared to ask relevant questions of the guests. Each unexcused absence reduces the participation score by ten points. Arriving late to class twice counts as an unexcused absence, unless a late arrival was beyond the student's control. Two unexcused absences reduces the earned final grade one full letter grade. A third unexcused absence reduces the earned final grade two full letter grades, and if a student has four unexcused absences, they fail the course. This rather strict attendance policy is used to reinforce the idea that attendance at work is mandatory, not optional like many of the classes the students have taken during their college career.

2. In order for the students to master the skills necessary for career development and enhancement, a hands-on structured career planning process is used to develop and implement the processes of self-assessment, career confirmation, decision-making, and self-marketing, which are all necessary for successful transitions from college to the world of work and for future career changes. This process requires each student to complete all of the following activities:

- a. Completion of the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator and the Strong Interest Inventory, including participating in a class interpretation and analysis session.

- b. A career analysis project that requires each student to:

- (1) Write an analysis on their primary occupation of interest by researching the occupation using resources in the university library, Career Development Services office, the Internet, and direct contact with organization representatives to investigate the specifics of their field of interest; the main responsibilities; needed training; specifics of the working environment; the job outlook; additional sources of information and

job leads for the occupation; potential earnings and intangible, personal and professional characteristics of the position. This report is 2-4 double-spaced pages in length.

(2) Conduct an informational interview with a professional (either in person or by phone) working directly or indirectly in their field of interest using the procedures and questions discussed in class and on a handout given to them in class. The students ask questions like, “What progress have you made?” “What have you learned?” “What mistakes have you made?” “What do you like best about your job?” and “What do you like least about your job?” After the interview, the students write a report that is 1-2 double-spaced pages in length.

(3) Submit a cover letter, a resume, and a 1-2 page double-spaced personal strategic marketing plan that maps out their job search strategy to include resources that will aid them in finding their first professional job.

(4) And, create a portfolio table of contents and plan of action incorporating items (1, 2, & 3) above in an effort to integrate the results of their overall development and activity/work efforts during their college career. Developing a portfolio table of contents involves listing tangible “products” such as papers, awards, students organizations, projects, and committees that they have produced or been a member of during their college career that illustrates accomplishments and skills related to their marketing plan to employers. The plan of action describes how to use the portfolio to illustrate their experience, strengths, and talents that make them an ideal candidate for the job they are seeking. In the plan of action, the students attempt to answer questions like, “What progress have you made?” “What have you learned?” “What mistakes have you made?” and “What do you need to add to your skill sets?” The students direct their answers toward the elements of their marketing plan for their number one job target. Portfolios can be organized in chronological or functional formats. Each student presents their portfolio outline and plan of action to the class.

3. The class is divided into teams of 3-4 members whose assignment is to analyze a city of their choice as a potential site for college graduates to live and work. The project structure is organized around three themes: strengths, weaknesses, and uniqueness. Information presented includes an analysis of economic, financial, social, climate, and cultural elements, as well as an overview of major employers in the area. Grades are based on organization, presentation, and depth of information developed. Each member of the group participates in the presentation, and professional dress, handouts, and visual aids are expected.

4. There are two in-class tests given based on assigned readings, class presentations and discussions, handouts, article presentations, and seminar discussions. Each exam is open book, and the use of notes and handouts are also encouraged.

Beyond this structured process that requires the students to produce tangible products that they will use later in their job search, several classes deal with practical situations that all students face during the process of winning their first great job. There are two classes dedicated to interviewing skills. Each student is also required to do a “mock interview” at the university career center to practice the techniques discussed. Students quickly learn that practice can really improve their ability to promote their skills and potential to an employer

during the interview process.

Another class deals with how and when to negotiate the job offer. Concepts such as “total compensation” as opposed to salary are discussed in detail. Methods to compare offers on location and benefits are analyzed. This class deals with the specifics of 401k plans, company stock options, pension plans, health plans, dental plans and many more benefits. Students are usually surprised that the benefits package can sometimes amount to nearly one-third of one’s salary. Further, cost of living differences among locations can easily account for a five to ten percent difference in real dollars. Once students understand that negotiating is not only possible, but also expected by many companies, their interest in job offer negotiation perks up.

A class on personal financial planning naturally follows the class on job offer negotiations. Students are usually interested and excited about the idea of what to do with their salary and how to manage their benefits. The financial planning class is entitled, “So You Want to be a Millionaire!” This class deals with financial budgeting, planning and investing for their future. The concepts of “doubling” and “the time value of money” as they relate to regular investing are discussed in detail, and with great interest by most students.

The last set of classes are not directly associated with the career analysis project but deal with relationships with others. First, there is a class dealing with how their relationships with their classmates and significant others may change as a result of graduation and acceptance of a job that may well be very far from most of their friends. From the discussion of how their college relationships may change, a second class goes into the relationships that will develop in their new organization. The importance of understanding the organization, identifying mentors, and relating with a more diverse, at least based on age, group of people are discussed. A special seminar is held on the challenges and common frustrations that new college graduates face in organizations, whether small or large, and how organizational size alone brings different opportunities and challenges.

### **Summary and Conclusion**

In summary, a course for seniors to help them refine the skills so necessary to compete for their first job, and how to succeed in the world of work is a very effective and active way to reach students. The course is organized around the career planning process that adds structure and produces products that the student will be using in their job search. This adds realism and interest to the course. Beyond developing a cover letter, resume, self-marketing plan, portfolio and plan of action, the students also work on their skills of interviewing and negotiating job offers. Practical matters such as personal financial planning, and how to deal effectively in establishing and maintaining good relationships during their transition from college to work and beyond are discussed and debated.

Student opinions about the value of the course are best captured by the often-expressed sentiments, “Everybody should be required to take this course!” and “I’ve learned so much in this course that is going to help me now!” After teaching the Senior Year Experience course for over four years to over 120 students, I have found that through the process of teaching a course about transitioning from college to the world of work, I have become a much better career counselor who remains more in tune with what skills graduating seniors



need to improve to be competitive in today's job market. This alone is a very good reason for career counselors to develop and teach such a course. I have also found that by teaching this course, I relate better with and work more collegially with the faculty. Teaching the Senior Year Experience requires time and work, but seeing the appreciation and joy of landing a truly great job before graduation is payback enough.

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