

**REPORT OF DRAKE UNIVERSITY**  
**SENIOR STUDENT EXPERIENCE FOCUS GROUPS**

**Report prepared by:**

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## **Report of Drake University Senior Student Experience Focus Groups**

### **BACKGROUND**

A review of institutional surveys of first-year and senior students at Drake University highlighted a decline in senior students' satisfaction with their academic experience at Drake. Accordingly, the Task Force on Academic Excellence decided to conduct an evaluation of the senior academic experience in spring 2004. The purpose of the evaluation is to provide useful information for decision making related to improving student learning and enhancing the student academic experience. The Research Institute for Studies in Education (RISE) at Iowa State University assisted with data collection and analysis. The following findings come from eight focus groups with senior students from various colleges.

### **METHODOLOGY**

RISE conducted the eight focus groups on April 28, 2004. A random sample of 140 senior students was selected from all students who were classified as seniors at the time of the study ( $n = 772$ ). The sample was stratified by college to ensure representation and to assist with data analysis. Additional efforts were made to achieve approximate gender balance within each focus group. The number of focus groups by college is as follows: Arts and Sciences (two focus groups), Business and Public Administration (two focus groups), Education (one focus group), Fine Arts (one focus group), Journalism and Mass Communication (one focus group), and Pharmacy (one focus group). A total of 72 students agreed to participate in the focus groups. Of these 72 students, approximately 60 students actually participated in the focus groups.

The focus group protocol was designed in consultation with the Task Force on Academic Excellence and Rise staff (Appendix A). Students completed an Informed Consent document before participating in the focus groups (Appendix B).

## **RESULTS**

This report provides information from the student focus groups. Topics that were discussed include academic demands, academic community, expectations for the senior year academic experience, capstone experience, and overall suggestions for improving the senior academic experience.

### **Academic Demands**

When asked about the academic demands of their senior year, most students described the experience as rigorous, indicating that the coursework was challenging. One student explained, “Seniors are expected to take on more responsibility. The outside course work becomes more extensive. We are expected to be more self-driven.” Students described their senior classes as intensive, demanding, and time-consuming. Another student stated, “Faculty do not let students slide by.” Respondents described their learning experiences during the senior year. A student from the College of Education explained that the senior year is an application of what students learned. Another student explained that senior work requires more in-depth analysis – interdisciplinary thinking, applying knowledge, and using multiple sources.

Students described aspects of their classroom experience that contributed to the high academic demands. One student said that they were expected to speak up more in class because the professors knew them well. Another student explained that the smaller classes in the senior year encouraged student participation. Other students said that more

professional, higher quality work was expected of seniors. One student stated, “You have to apply all that you’ve learned into all of your work, so high level work is expected.”

Some students explained that specific aspects of the courses were more difficult, such as an increased emphasis on design and theory or an increased intensity of outside course work. One student commented that the academic rigor could impede students’ graduation date. Although it is difficult to ascertain the extent to which this is true for other students, the student related that three out of eight friends would not be able to graduate on time due to the high curriculum expectations.

Several aspects of the senior year contributed to the sense of high demands and expectations. Students explained that requirements such as taking capstones or preparing portfolios took a lot of time. Students in professional programs added that activities such as student teaching (Education), rotations (Pharmacy), or preparing for competency examinations/licensing contributed to the demands of the senior year.

Students described the importance of faculty to the senior academic experience. One student stated, “Faculty act as a catalyst for student learning.” Other students said that because faculty members knew senior students well, they encouraged students to participate in class and “pushed even more.” Several students articulated that faculty members were also sensitive to personal issues and to the extra demands placed on seniors, who are looking for jobs or applying to graduate schools. Students noted that new faculty members and adjunct faculty lacked experience, which influenced students’ interest in their courses.

In contrast to the students who described the high academic demands, some suggested that the senior academic experience was not challenging. One student in the

Arts and Sciences College expressed that although the coursework was heavy in terms of projects, the content of the coursework was not difficult. The same student expressed disappointment with the number of first-year and sophomore students enrolled in similar classes. Another student described the senior year as “disappointing” because of the low difficulty level in the courses and a lack of stimulation. A third student stated that the junior year was more difficult, explaining that the remaining classes only included seminars.

### **Academic Community**

Students were asked what they would like in terms of an academic community. Several themes emerged as students described the current academic community at Drake. First, students indicated that there is not much interaction with other students. They defined their academic community as the people they live with and who they see in classes. Second, seniors felt that the academic community was different compared to the first-year and sophomore experience. Many expressed the opinion that on-campus events were focused on younger students and were not welcoming or attractive to senior students. Third, respondents indicated that the individual colleges formed separate academic communities. Many students stated that they would like more interaction with other colleges. Several students explained that they do not enter different buildings on campus (outside their college) and that there was a need to interact with students from different colleges. Students from some colleges and departments described their community as secluded (e.g., education, music).

Students explained that they would like to develop a stronger sense of community during their senior year. One student stated, “I would like a larger community during my

junior and senior years.” Another student desired a closer relationship among faculty and students. Other students described a need for more networking with alumni.

Students offered multiple strategies that could enhance academic community:

- Improve communication about campus events, promote communication across colleges, and reduce the amount of junk email.
- Develop activities that are attractive to and specifically designed for seniors.

Students commented that programs and public places are used more by younger students. This may have the effect of causing upper-class students to see themselves as outsiders.

- Find ways to increase interaction across departments and colleges (e.g., senior student seminars, interdisciplinary capstone experiences, expansion of events like Journalism Days or Business Days).
- Facilitate the formation of off-campus study groups.
- Find ways to continue academic discussion and discourse outside of class in study group-like settings.
- Encourage activities such as participation in professional societies.
- Develop ways to facilitate networking with alumni, such as the creation of a regional database of alumni that advisors could share with seniors.
- Find ways to connect academic experiences with future professional roles. For example, require internship experiences or provide more “real-world” speakers to campus.

## **Expectations for the Senior Year Academic Experience**

Students described their expectations for the senior year academic experience. Students expected courses that required higher level thinking skills. Students indicated that classes should emphasize conceptualization over memorization. They enjoyed student interaction, rather than lecture-based courses. Students preferred small classes that emphasized student discussion. As one student described, these types of courses, “captivate my mind.” Another student explained, “Classes should focus on tying in everything we’ve learned the last four years and focus on how we have grown and matured.” Students also expected that courses and faculty would link concepts to the “real world” and “hands-on” application of knowledge.

Students clearly articulated the high expectations for senior academic work. They discussed how seniors are expected to provide in-depth analysis, analyze information from different viewpoints, think critically, develop questions, reflect, anticipate arguments, and exceed course expectations. Students appeared to appreciate the occasions when faculty challenged them.

However, some students expected a higher level of difficulty during their senior year. One student said that there is a difference between working hard and learning hard, suggesting that students may be required to perform work tasks rather than demonstrate learning. Other students indicated that course content was sometimes repetitive and that there was a need for more communication about curriculum areas covered within departments.

One common theme in students’ comments was the important influence of faculty. Students from various colleges indicated that high numbers of new or temporary

faculty influenced the stability of the academic experience. One student explained, “I look forward to talking with my faculty members when I leave. I would like for them to be more permanent.” Another student stated, “People choose Drake for the intimacy, and they want that ability with their faculty.” Respondents indicated that it was difficult to develop rapport with temporary professors.

Several students expected their coursework and experiences to prepare them for future careers. Students in the College of Education were pleased with their experiences; “I go to job fair meetings, and I am surprised [by the lack of preparation] of students from other schools,” and “We come out more prepared... We have the opportunity to try things out before we start teaching...” While education students felt prepared for their job searches, students from other colleges expressed frustration that they did not receive help finding jobs. Some students thought that it would be helpful to require students to have an internship.

### **Capstone**

Students shared various views regarding their satisfaction with the capstone experience. Some students indicated it represented a culmination of their academic efforts; others explained that it was busywork, while a few indicated that they did not know that they had a capstone.

A majority of the students explained that they enjoyed the capstone experience. Students liked capstones that were practical and that emphasized hands-on application of what they learned. Some said that the capstone helped to “tie things together” and that it was a “culmination of what we learned.” One example of a capstone experience many students enjoyed was a simulation that marketing students in the

College of Business and Public Administration experienced. Students explained that the simulation covered all content areas of marketing, used realistic scenarios, and helped students understand what they had learned. Several students in various focus groups said that everything they had learned “built up” to their capstone, which was a cumulative experience of all the classes they took at Drake. One student discussed the importance of capstone courses that emphasize application; “I was nervous about going out into the real world without having actually applied what I’d been learning.”

Other students, however, expressed less satisfaction with the capstone experience. One student described the capstone, “It is memorization. We do not learn. We do not think.” Another student said, “The focus of my capstone is on memorization, which is bad...My capstone does not apply to my future at all. I thought it would be an integration of my previous classes.” Others felt that their capstones were general and did not offer any apparent real world application. Some students thought that their capstone course was busywork and reported that the main product of the course was a large paper. One student felt that the capstone experience was completely separate from what the student had done and learned in classes at Drake.

Two students in the Liberal Arts and Sciences College indicated that they were vaguely familiar with the capstone experience. One explained that an advisor signed off on the requirement, while the other said, “I took a seminar course. I did not know that it was the capstone. Advising would have been helpful.”

In addition to providing comments regarding their satisfaction with the capstone experience, students offered various suggestions for ways to improve the capstone:

- Provide more structure that gives basic steps for the capstone rather than broad ideas. Additional structure would also assist students with dual majors.
- Promote early and ongoing communication between students and advisors regarding the capstone experience.
- Assist students with planning for their capstone courses to ensure that these courses meet students' needs rather than simply complete a requirement.
- Make capstones pertinent to students' academic major.
- Develop ways to increase interaction between students regarding their capstone experiences (e.g., presenting information, sharing about the planning process).
- Create capstone experiences that both represent a culmination of academic activities and offer clear practical applications of knowledge (e.g., preparing a brochure for a company).
- Provide capstone experiences that link academic training to the "real world" and are applicable to future careers.

Students offered various opinions regarding the need for consistency between capstones concerning the amount of work required. Some indicated the need for more similarity or consistency among capstone projects. Others, however, disagreed and thought that because degrees differ, capstones should be different too. In short, while some students thought that there was a discrepancy between the amount of work required for various capstones; others commented that there was no way to judge which capstones required more work and that any comparison would be subjective.

## **Suggestions for Senior Academic Experience**

Seniors offered several ideas on ways to improve their academic experiences. Many of the comments below related to students' earlier comments regarding what they would like in terms of an academic community.

Students indicated that courses should be challenging and require students to engage in higher order learning activities. Students described their ideal courses as ones that “invoked thought” and were “thought based.” Students explained that they preferred discussion courses compared to classes where the professor lectured. They also preferred classes with only upper class students because these courses tended to have high interaction and smaller class sizes.

In addition to taking classes that encouraged higher order thinking, students recommended having more interdisciplinary courses. For example, one student thought it would be interesting to examine how law connects with biology or psychology. Several students suggested creating a senior year seminar. Students explained that this would bring all majors together and help to connect senior students. One student said that it would be easy to organize senior events through these seminars. Another student commented that a senior seminar could help students with planning for their futures.

Students also wanted courses to emphasize application of class experiences to their lives. One example of ways that students thought class experiences could apply to their future lives included Pharmacy students' suggestion that there should be more required presentations. These Pharmacy students indicated that they are required to do presentations during their rotations and explained that they would feel more prepared if they had more experience presenting. In general, many students offered support for the

need to emphasize application exercises by indicating that hands-on experiences helped them to learn material.

Student comments suggested that faculty were a key factor in their satisfaction with the senior academic experience. One student explained, “The [success] of the class is based on the teacher; not the subject.” Students also developed expectations for a deeper personal relationship with faculty. One student commented, “Professors who relate to students on a personal level, especially in the senior year, are better able to motivate students.” Other students simply said that they would like for professors to be more involved with students. Students in several colleges noted the importance of maintaining high quality faculty and ensuring that faculty positions are fully staffed. Students discussed the need to ensure funding for faculty.

Students shared the importance of out-of-class experiences. One student commented that the study abroad program promoted a change in world view. Other students said that internships helped them prepare for a career. One student thought that internships should be structured into the curriculum. As noted earlier, some students wanted to find ways to continue discourse outside of the classroom in small groups. Together, these comments indicate that students seek out-of-class experiences that change their perspectives, apply to their career goals, and enhance interaction with other seniors.

Students commented that they would like to see improved communication in several different areas. While many students talked about the need to improve communication regarding campus activities, some students considered ways to improve communication among students. For example, students’ recommendation to develop

senior seminars stems from their positive experience interacting with students from various colleges during their first-year student seminars. Students in the Pharmacy focus group offered an example of ways that communication among students can improve students' experiences. Pharmacy students in particular discussed the value of creating a communication system that would allow 5<sup>th</sup> year and 6<sup>th</sup> year students to interact. They explained that this communication would allow 5<sup>th</sup> year students to learn more about the rotations and could prepare 6<sup>th</sup> year students to serve as preceptors. The students indicated that increased communication could create a tutor/mentor system that would benefit both groups.

Senior students said there was a need to develop the campus community. Many students explained that they visited campus to attend classes and then returned to their off-campus residence. Seniors perceived that social events were geared for first-year or sophomore students. Many said that seniors did not go to events for several reasons such as a lack of communication (no posters in academic buildings) or a fear that other seniors would not attend. Students desired more social events specifically designed for seniors. Many enjoyed the senior party in Olmsted and recommended similar events in the future such as an I-Cub Senior Day. In short, students wanted more structured out-of-class opportunities to interact with other Drake senior students from various colleges.

Many students expressed concerns about the upcoming transitions in their lives. One person commented, "We need a lot of help to prepare for what will happen to us after graduation." Some students wanted more assistance for students who are interested in attending graduate school. Many students indicated that they would like more assistance with finding careers. Some students expressed the need to have updated job

information that included opportunities across the country. Students from several colleges said that the career center served the needs of specific majors, but did not provide the same level of service for all majors. Some students explained that it would be helpful to have a career counselor for each college.

Students also commented that they would like assistance in establishing connections to alumni. Overall, many students expressed the importance of taking advantage of the alumni network. One student said that the list of alumni distributed by the career center was out-dated and did not provide enough information to allow students to narrow down potential contacts. In addition to developing connections to current alumni, some respondents thought that it was important to help senior students develop as future alumni. They suggested sharing with seniors the different ways that they could be involved with and remain connected to Drake. They explained that they do not want to simply be asked for money, but would also like to share their time and talent. One student said, “I would feel that Drake had respect if they checked-up on me and made an effort to maintain the relationship.”

## **SUMMARY**

Many of the respondents described the academic demands of the senior year as rigorous, challenging, and intensive. Students indicated that high faculty expectations and smaller class sizes contributed to these high academic demands. Other students, however, commented that the senior academic experience was not challenging due to low difficulty and lack of stimulation. It appeared that many students who experienced low levels of academic challenge were enrolled in larger, introductory classes.

When describing the academic community, seniors explained that there is not much interaction with other students outside of the classroom. Students commented that the sense of community was different compared to the first-year and sophomore experience, explaining that many on-campus events concentrate on younger students. Students in each of the focus groups indicated a desire for more interaction with seniors from different colleges. Students offered several strategies for enhancing academic community, which are listed on page six.

Students expected senior-level courses to emphasize higher level thinking skills, to provide a clear application of knowledge to practice, and to prepare students for future careers. Students also expected to develop rapport with faculty members and indicated that temporary faculty influenced the academic experience.

Respondents who enjoyed the capstone described it as a practical, hands-on application of what they had learned. Many felt that the capstone was a culmination of learning at Drake. Students who were less satisfied with the capstone explained that the focus of their capstone was a major paper or memorization. Student suggestions for ways to improve the capstone experience are listed on page ten.

Drake students provided several suggestions to improve the senior academic experience. They indicated that courses should encourage higher order thinking, emphasize application of knowledge, and involve interdisciplinary perspectives. They emphasized that high quality faculty are important to the senior year experience. Students would like to see increased communication about campus activities and increased communication/interaction among students. Students said that there was a need to develop the campus community and would like to see more events specifically designed

for seniors. Many seniors expressed concerns about their future transitions and indicated that they would like more assistance in finding careers and connecting with alumni.

## Appendix A

### **Protocol:**

1. Tell us about the academic demands and expectations for the senior year at Drake.
2. During your senior year, what would you like in terms of an academic community?
3. Have your academic expectations changed? Why?
4. Tell us about your capstone. How does the capstone relate to your learning experience at Drake?
5. What would you recommend to improve the capstone experience?
6. What suggestions do you have for the senior year academic experience at Drake (making the senior year more challenging, exciting, and otherwise academically meaningful)?

## Appendix B

### Statement of Informed Consent

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study, which is being conducted jointly by Drake University and the Research Institute for Studies in Education at Iowa State University. The purpose of this focus group is to give you the opportunity to express your thoughts and opinions about the senior academic experience at Drake.

We will be asking you a series of open-ended questions that focus on your thoughts, opinions, and overall assessment of the senior academic experience.

As we are interested only in aggregate data, the confidentiality of your comments will be maintained. The information you share will not be attributed to you in any way, nor will the analysis identify any participants by name or by role, directly or indirectly. Your comments will be aggregated and analyzed with those of your peers'. The aggregated data, along with the analysis, will be presented in a written report.

The statements below provide you with important information regarding your rights as a participant:

- I understand that the study involves a discussion that lasts for an hour or less. We would like to tape-record our conversation for the purposes of accurately capturing and retaining comments for analysis. All of the interview tapes will be erased/destroyed immediately following their transcription.
- I understand that my participation in this study is entirely voluntary, and that if I wish to withdraw from the study or to leave, I may do so at any time, and that I do not need to give any reasons or explanations for doing so. If I do withdraw from the study, I understand that this will have no effect on my relationship with Drake University, Iowa State University, or any other organization or agency.
- I understand that I have an obligation to respect the privacy of other members of the group by not disclosing any personal information they share during our discussion.
- I understand that I will receive a \$20.00 cash payment for participating in the study.

The members of the research team will answer any questions I may have about the study and what I am expected to do.

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**Participant Statement:**

I affirm my full understanding of the rights and guarantees/assurances afforded to me as a participant. I agree to participate willingly, without undue inducement or any element of force, fraud, deceit, duress, or other form of constraint or coercion, in this study. However, I retain my right not to answer a particular question(s) or to withdraw from this study at any time.

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Signature of Participant)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Date)

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**Evaluator Statement:**

I certify that the participant has been given adequate time to read and learn about the study and, at this time, all of the participant's questions have been answered. It is my opinion that the participant understands the purpose, risks, benefits and procedures that will be followed in this study and has voluntarily agreed to participate.

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Signature of Evaluator)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Date)

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