

REPORT OF DRAKE UNIVERSITY TASK FORCE ON ACADEMIC EXCELLENCE A FOCUS ON THE SENIOR STUDENT EXPERIENCE

The Task Force on Academic Excellence was appointed in February 2004 and charged to:

- Identify opportunities for fulfilling Drake's mission of integrating liberal and professional education.
- Identify where the Drake student experience needs to be improved in order to provide an exceptional education.
- Develop recommendations for providing students with a comprehensively integrated and exceptional education in the classroom and in other environments across the University.
- Present a plan for implementation of the recommendations.

With initiation of the re-accreditation self-study process, much of this task became the province of two of the self-study Committees and the charge to the Task Force was modified to focus specifically on the senior experience at Drake University. Thus the following pages provide a summary of deliberations concerning the senior experience, information garnered from focus group research with Drake seniors during the spring of 2004, and research into programs at other institutions that might provide models for addressing perceived shortcomings of the Drake senior experience.

Members of the Task Force:

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¹ Due to graduation, Hanson and Kwok had to resign prior to completion of the report.

THE DRAKE SENIOR EXPERIENCE

Results of various surveys have suggested that while the first-year experience at Drake University is academically challenging and that students are highly satisfied with the experience, the senior experience is less positive. For some years, Drake Student Surveys have shown seniors to be less satisfied with many aspects of the Drake experience than were students in earlier stages of their academic careers.

The 2002 and 2003 results of the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) reinforced this finding and raised concern about the senior experience. Of particular concern was that:

- Drake seniors scored at the 90th percentile on the 2001 NSSE survey “Level of Academic Challenge” scale, but dropped to the 40th percentile in 2002 and to the 30th percentile in 2003.
- Drake seniors scored at the 80th percentile on the 2001 NSSE survey “Active and Collaborative Learning” scale, but dropped to the 40th percentile in 2002 and rose only slightly to the 50th percentile in 2003.
- Drake seniors scored only at the 60th percentile in 2002 and 2003 on the “Interactions with Faculty Members” scale; and at the 50th percentile in both years on the “Supportive Campus Environment” Scale.

While these results did not provide definitive information about the Drake senior experience, they did raise concern. Certainly there is an expectation that given Drake’s very positive academic reputation, the student responses should place Drake higher on these scales.

Additional Task Force Observations

Initial Task Force deliberations lead to identification of a number of factors perceived to characterize the senior experience.

- Basic goals of the Drake Curriculum are not coming to fruition in the senior year:
 - Many students fail to integrate liberal and professional education in a manner that prepares them to respond to social change.
 - Students are not seeing the relevance of general education courses to their futures and thus fail to engage in deeper learning from those courses.
 - Many students have a too narrowly professional focus despite faculty intentions otherwise.
 - Students are too focused on employment and not focused enough on making connections among their classes.

- In-class and out-of-class learning are not being linked effectively.
- Students have low expectations regarding communication skills.
- Communication needs to improve:
 - Educational outcomes for graduation must be better defined for all students
 - A conversation about the final year experience (similar to the ongoing conversation about the first-year experience) needs to be developed.
 - Advising about senior and post-graduate experiences needs to improve.
- A sense of community is lacking:
 - More cultural and social events are needed on campus.
 - Alumni identification and involvement with Drake is weak.
 - Open time slots should be provided for community events in the master schedule.
- Students face many and conflicting demands:
 - Students are extremely busy, often with off-campus responsibilities
 - Students and faculty are too busy to connect effectively.
- We need to recognize where seniors are emotionally and provide experiences that integrate classroom learning with out-of-class experiences.
- In some colleges the capstone requirement is poorly understood and is not providing a challenging, rewarding, and integrative academic experience. The lack of clear expectations is evident among both students and faculty.

FOCUS GROUPS

The Task Force decided to utilize focus group methodology to explore more fully the academic experience and perceptions of Drake University seniors. The Research Institute for Studies in Education (RISE) of the Iowa State University College of Education was engaged to carry out the focus group research and write a report., Under the direction of Kevin Saunders, RISE conducted eight focus groups on April 28, 2004. Stratified random sampling was used to select students, who then were called and invited to participate in the focus groups. Seventy-two students agreed to participate and 60 actually participated. The focus groups were divided by academic unit, with two groups each for Arts and Sciences and Business and Public Administration students and one each for Education, Fine Arts, Journalism and Mass Communication, and Pharmacy. ²

² A full report of the methodology is presented in their final report.

The focus group protocol was designed in consultation with the Task Force. Questions focused on their perceptions of the senior academic experience at Drake University.³ Focus group participants were asked for perceptions of academic demands, their sense of community, and about the capstone experience. Students also were asked to make recommendations for change in the senior year experience.⁴

Focus Group Findings

Academic Demand and Rigor

Most students described the academic demands of their senior year as rigorous, indicating that the coursework was challenging. They seemed to appreciate when faculty challenge them. As examples, they mentioned:

- They believe that higher expectations are placed on them, as illustrated by the following:
 - “Seniors are expected to take on more responsibility.
 - “Faculty do not let students slide by.”
 - “We are expected to be more self-driven.”
 - Many indicated that more professional, higher quality work was expected of seniors.
- They noted the following more rigorous senior-year expectations:
 - Senior work requires ability to do in-depth analysis, analyze information from different viewpoints, think critically, develop questions, think interdisciplinarily, apply knowledge, reflect, anticipate arguments, and exceed course expectations.
 - Requirement of higher level thinking skills.
 - Emphasis on conceptualization over memorization.
 - Student interaction, rather than lecture-based courses.
 - You have to apply all that you’ve learned into all of your work, so high level work is expected.”
 - A student from the College of Education explained that the senior year is an application of what students learned.
- Class demands are more and different:
 - The outside coursework becomes more extensive.
 - Senior classes are described as intensive, demanding, and time-consuming.
 - Classes tie together everything they have learned over the four years and focus on how they have grown and matured.
 - Small classes emphasize student discussion; classes “captivate my mind.”
 - Classes link concepts to the “real world” and “hands-on” application of knowledge.
 - They are expected to speak up more in class because the professors know them well.

³ The full focus group protocol appears as Appendix A of the Focus Group Report.

⁴ See Appendix to full report for the full set of questions

- The smaller classes in the senior year encourage student participation
- Specific aspects of the courses, such as an increased emphasis on design and theory or an increased intensity of outside course work, are more demanding.
- Requirements such as taking capstones or preparing portfolios take a lot of time.
- In professional programs, activities such as student teaching (Education), rotations (Pharmacy), or preparing for competency examinations/licensing contribute to the demands of the senior year.

However, some suggested that the senior academic experience was less challenging than expected:

- Several students voiced criticisms regarding the relationship between course content and level of demand:
 - Although the coursework could be heavy in terms of projects, the content of the coursework could still be not difficult. Some students have been disappointed by low difficulty and lack of stimulation in culminating courses.
 - The challenge for the senior student can be compromised by the number of first-year and sophomore students enrolled in supposedly high-level classes.
 - The seminar format is no guarantee that a class will be challenging; the course needs to be more difficult than junior year courses.
- Comments included:
 - “There is a difference between working hard and learning hard,” suggesting that students may be required to perform work tasks rather than demonstrate learning.
 - “Course content is sometimes repetitive and there is a need for more communication about curriculum areas covered within departments.”

The Capstone

A specific focus of the group discussions was the Capstone Experience. A majority of the students enjoyed the capstone experience as illustrated by the following:

- For some it represented a culmination of their academic efforts; the capstone helped to “tie things together;” it was a “cumulative experience.”
- Students liked capstones that are practical and emphasize hands-on application of what they have learned.

Other students, however, expressed less satisfaction

- Problematic descriptions included:
 - “The capstone was busy work; the main product of the course was a large paper.”
 - “It is memorization. We do not learn. We do not think.”
 - “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.”

- Some felt that their capstones were general and did not offer any apparent real world application.
- One student felt that the capstone experience was completely separate from what the student had done and learned in classes at Drake.
- 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.
- A few students indicated that they did not know that they had a capstone. Two students 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.”

The Role of Faculty in the Senior Experience

Faculty are central to satisfaction with the senior academic experience. This was articulated in several statements:

- “Faculty act as a catalyst for student learning.”
- Because faculty members know seniors well, they encourage students to participate in class and “push even more.”
- Faculty members are sensitive to personal issues and to the extra demands placed on seniors looking for jobs or applying to graduate schools.
- “The [success] of the class is based on the teacher; not the subject.”
- Students also developed expectations for a deeper personal relationship with faculty.

The perceived importance of faculty, lead some students to express concern about the number of new and adjunct faculty at Drake. Such faculty lack experience, which influenced students’ interest in their courses. Students in several colleges noted the importance of maintaining high quality faculty and ensuring that faculty positions are fully staffed. Students from various colleges indicated that high numbers of new or temporary faculty influenced the stability of the academic experience. Respondents indicated that it was difficult to develop rapport with temporary professors.

Perceptions of Academic Community

Drake seniors reported a lack of significant interaction with other students. Their interaction occurs primarily with the people with whom they live and to some extent with students with whom they take classes.

- Many expressed the opinion that on-campus events were focused on younger students and were not welcoming or attractive to senior students.
- Individual colleges form separate academic communities. They tend to confine their academic experience to their own college buildings.
- Students would like more interaction with students from other colleges; more interdisciplinary interaction. Students from some colleges and departments described their community as secluded (e.g., education, music).
- Students would like to develop a stronger sense of community during their senior year.
 - They desire closer relationships with both faculty and students.
 - Students expressed a need for more networking with alumni; current information provided is out of date. This also would help them think about their roles as future alumni.

The Role of Non-class Activities in the Senior Academic Experience

Many focus group participants commented on the importance of out-of-class activities to the senior experience. Comments focused most completely on activities designed to assist the transition to graduate school or the work world.

- “The study abroad program promoted a change in worldview.”
- Internships helped them prepare for a career. One student thought that internships should be structured into the curriculum as a requirement.
- Students in the School of Education were pleased with their job preparation experiences. Students from other units expressed frustration that they did not receive help finding jobs.
- Students want more assistance with the upcoming transition in their lives:
 - More assistance for students who are interested in attending graduate school;
 - More assistance with finding careers;
 - Need updated job information including opportunities across the country.

Variation Across Academic Units

Perceptions of the senior experience differed somewhat by the college or school in which they are enrolled. These are detailed in the “Addendum to the Report of Drake University Senior Student Experience Focus Groups.” As recommendations for improving the senior experience are implemented, the individual college differences should be examined.

Student Suggestions for Change

Students made many suggestions for change in the Drake Senior experience. Among these were:

Enhance the Academic Experience

- Students recommended having more interdisciplinary courses. For example, examine how law connects with biology or psychology.
- Several students suggested creating a senior year seminar; this would bring all majors together and help to connect senior students. This stems from their positive experience interacting with students from various colleges during their first-year student seminars.
- **Capstone Suggestions:** Students offered various suggestions for ways to improve the capstone:
 - 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.
 - Promote early and ongoing communication between students and advisors regarding the capstone experience. This should include early planning to ensure that these courses meet students’ needs rather than simply complete a requirement.
 - Make capstones pertinent to students’ academic majors.
 - Develop ways to increase interaction among students regarding their capstone experiences (e.g., presenting information, sharing about the planning process).
 - Provide more structure for the capstone rather than broad ideas. Additional structure would also assist students with dual majors.

Enhance Communication and Interaction

- Improve communication about campus events; promote communication across colleges without simply increasing e-mail (e.g., put posters in academic buildings).
- 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 formation of off-campus study groups.
- Find ways to continue academic discussion and discourse outside of class.

Develop Senior Specific Activities

- Students wanted more structured out-of-class opportunities to interact with Drake senior students from various colleges.

Better Connections to Future Educational and Professional Roles

- Facilitate networking with alumni; e.g., create 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; encourage participation in professional societies.

RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE TASK FORCE

Joseph Cuseo (1997) suggests a number of goals for the senior year experience. Many of his suggestions are consistent with the suggestions made by Drake University seniors in the focus group discussions. These include bringing coherence and relevance to the general education program, integration and synthesis of the major, connecting the senior year to the career, educational, and personal goals of post-college life, and providing a context for responsible civic participation after college. In addition to these points, the Task Force suggests that an effective senior experience must be tied clearly to the mission of the university, must be institution specific in character, and must create a distinctive senior culture culminating a four-year experience. Finally, the institution must be invested in making it happen.

The following recommendations derive from the focus group suggestions, the work done by Gardner and associates, and research on programs at other universities concerning the senior year experience. The order in which the recommendations are listed does not signify relative importance.

1. Any plan for enhancing the senior experience must include conscious consideration academic programming throughout the entire curriculum. The Drake Curriculum Committee and individual programs and faculty must work to build and maintain

engagement, and a positive learning environment that is connected consciously and deliberately to the Drake University mission.

2. Capstone Experience: It is clear that the Capstone Experience at Drake is inconsistent in character and quality. Student comments suggest that faculty in some cases do not take this requirement seriously. The Task Force has noted that less specific guidance has been provided for development of capstone experiences than occurred with the first-year seminars. There may have been an assumption that faculty had a clear sense of what the senior experience, and the capstone, should be since the senior year tends to be seen as more focused on the major(s).
 - A. A set of goals, guidelines and other statements that will provide assistance in examination of the capstone experiences should be developed. Central to such guidelines should be encouragement to:
 - Create integrated capstones, that are interactive and problem-based.
 - Create capstone experiences that engage students "where they are"—i.e., in ways that involve doing something that is directly relevant to their academic and vocational objectives.
 - Mark the importance and centrality of the capstone experience to the undergraduate program, perhaps by assigning more credit hours to the courses.
 - B. Using these guidelines, each academic program should focus on examination of their capstone experiences during the next year.
 - C. Faculty need to be more conscious of the goals of the capstone so that they can do more effective advising. Working with other faculty across the university to generate a discourse and exchange about what various programs are offering will provide a way to model effective capstone experiences.
 - D. Facilitating and assessing development of the capstone experience should be a top priority of the Director of the Drake Curriculum for the next several years.
 - E. Work toward these objectives should begin with Self-Study Committees on "Student Learning and Effective Teaching," and "Acquisition, Discovery, and Application of Knowledge" and the University-wide articulation of programmatic outcomes in fall 2004. Capstone specific planning should begin in spring 2005
3. The possibility of developing a senior seminar program should be explored. Such a program should, if possible, provide students an opportunity to integrate the general education, disciplinary, and experiential learning that they have experienced over four year thorough a focus on real-world problems. A senior-seminar program could be established either as a required part of the Drake Curriculum, or as an elective.

4. A Writing and Speaking Center should be established to nurture skill-development, more engaged academic interaction, and pedagogical innovation across the curriculum.
 - A. Writing and speaking centers provide the experience and perspectives essential for students to be prepared for capstone and professional presentations. Most capstones showcase and are dependent on communication skills. This is important means for orienting students in the second and third years toward their capstone, and for preparing them to complete that project.
 - B. A Writing and Speaking Center might also develop specific programs for seniors preparing to enter the job market.

5. A conscious communication plan must be developed. Seniors must come to understand that the senior experience is unique and that Drake University recognizes the special issues that they face.
 - A. Develop a more extensive senior-experience website, under editorial control of the academic division, with information about senior activities. This could include steps to ensure graduation, commencement activities, and special activities for seniors.
 - B. Have seniors speak to first-year students, especially about capstone experiences, through the FYS program and also by developing other means for mixing first-year and final-year students.

6. We must consciously develop better ways of connecting the senior year with the post-graduate years, and work to create a clearer sense of what it means to become a responsible alumnus.
 - A. Better ways of assisting students to explore career and graduate school options must be developed.
 - B. "Career services" must work with students at each stage of the student's education at Drake to foster professional development. Two shifts from typical practice are suggested:
 - Focus developmentally instead of on the last year;
 - Distribute services throughout the institution instead of having them concentrated in a walk-in center.
 - C. Drake must make clear commitments to our alums.
 - Determine what resources might be most important to alumni. For instance, students might be provided with email services, access to on-line library services.
 - Create other connections that will assist seniors in their post-graduate years.

7. Create a "senior week."
 - A. This should be an academically rich and socially integrated experience.
 - B. The campus must explore designating a 2-3 day, midweek time, toward the end of spring semester, for senior presentations. Classes would be canceled. Seniors from all disciplines would present their senior work in the form of papers, projects, posters, recitals, and other presentations. This would build on the science day events that occurred this spring.
 - C. Require senior involvement, and require attendance at a specified number of events by other students.
 - D. Parents, alumni and community members should be invited to come to see and hear the presentations.
 - E. Bring alumni and community members to campus to as speakers. This would emphasize the role of alums in "giving something back" to Drake.
 - F. A centerpiece "Drake Tradition" could be developed around the opening of the drum containing essays that the students wrote during New Student Week at the start of their first academic year.
 - G. The week should include some specifically "seniors and faculty" social opportunities.
8. In development of and communication about the senior academic experience, it should be clear that the experience is intended to achieve the goals of the mission statement of the University.
9. As stated at the earlier, the institution must invest in transforming the senior year experience. The Task Force recommends that limited-term allocation of administrative support be made for development and assessment of these and similar recommendations to foster a stronger academic experience in the senior year. Support should include appointment of a coordinator who will oversee development of the senior capstone and seminar programs until such time that more routine oversight by the academic units and the Drake Curriculum Committee can be assumed. It also should include allocations for workshops, course development, web development and other faculty and staff development essential to success of the senior experience.

CONCLUSION

Drake University has an excellent first-year academic program that is the result of several years of dedicated development and continued investment by faculty and administration. The University also has a comprehensive general education program that provides the architecture for a distinctively meaningful senior year. That final academic experience, however, has not been developed and implemented consistently. Steps need to be taken to ensure that all Drake students have a challenging, rewarding, and integrative academic experience throughout their final year of study, one that can be a substantial and personally meaningful step into an active vocational and civic life.

It is clear that adequate and stable faculty staffing is a necessary condition for effective engagement with senior students, and that development of senior-level programming should be done through academic departments and colleges. It also is clear that faculty can not be expected to advise and oversee capstone experiences effectively without that becoming a more explicit feature of the institutional culture, and that development of that culture is not likely to happen if left to program-level planning. There is need for a specific administrative commitment to enhancing the senior academic experience and especially the capstone requirement over the next few years.

Nationally, many schools have not or are just beginning to take similar steps, while a range of model programs also are available. Were the University now to focus intensively on the senior year experience, it could claim to be at the leading edge of undergraduate instruction. If it waits too long, the same steps will have to be taken simply to be comparable to other schools.

This report is submitted in a spirit of commitment to the University's pursuit of excellence. The internal reviews, reorganization, and development during the past several years, along with the improved financial condition of the institution, provide a good basis for making a strong commitment at this time to enhancing the senior year. The Task Force believes that doing so would be the best response to fulfilling previous strategic planning recommendations and the University mission statement. We urge implementation of the recommendations in this report.

References

Joseph B. Cuseo "Objectives and Benefits of Senior Year Programs." In Gardner, J.N. and Van der Veer, G, and Associates (1997). *The Senior Year Experience: Facilitating Integration*,

Reflection, Closure, and Transition, San Francisco, CA: Jossey Bass Publishers. Also see website < <http://www.sc.edu/fye/resources/syr/>>

Addenda

“REPORT OF DRAKE UNIVERSITY SENIOR STUDENT EXPERIENCE FOCUS GROUPS,” Report prepared by: Kevin Saunders, Research Institute for Studies in Education, College of Education, Iowa State University, May 27, 2004.

“ADDENDUM TO THE REPORT OF DRAKE UNIVERSITY SENIOR STUDENT EXPERIENCE FOCUS GROUPS,” Report prepared by: Kevin Saunders, Research Institute for Studies in Education, College of Education, Iowa State University, June 30, 2004.

Packet of information about senior experiences and capstone experiences at other institutions.