



Engaging the Senior Class: Programming and Curricular Strategies to Support the Transition Out of College

Custom Research Brief • August 20, 2009

RESEARCH ASSOCIATE
Katherine Feeney

RESEARCH DIRECTOR
Jennifer Yarrish

TABLE OF CONTENTS

- I. Research Methodology
- II. Executive Overview
- III. Profile: University of Connecticut
- IV. Senior Seminar: Curricular Components
- V. Preparatory Programming
- VI. Social Components
- VII. Marketing & Measuring the Senior Experience
- VIII. Networking Contacts

I. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Project Challenge

In considering implementation of senior-specific programming, a private university in the South approached the Council with the following:

- *What types of programming and events are coordinated to engage seniors with one another and with the university?*
- *How are other universities celebrating the undergraduate experience and preparing students for their future?*
- *What type of programming in the senior year will help students to become engaged, active alumni?*

Project Sources

- ❖ Education Advisory Board's internal and online research libraries: www.educationadvisoryboard.com
- ❖ The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching: <http://carnegiefoundation.org/index.asp>
- ❖ The National Center for Education Statistics: <http://nces.ed.gov>
- ❖ Contact institutions' Web sites

Research Parameters

At the request of the member institution, the Forum reached out to a wide variety of institutions, all of whom have enacted senior-year programming or curricular components. Some Council contacts were faculty members; the remainder of contacts were student affairs personnel.

I. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A Guide to Colleges Profiled in this Brief			
College	Location	Approximate Enrollment (Total/ Undergraduate)	Carnegie Classification
University A	Large city	5,000/ 4,000	Private; Doctoral/ Research University
University B	Large city	32,000/ 18,000	Private; Master's University (large programs)
University C	Large suburb	20,000/ 18,000	Public; Master's University (large programs)
University D	Rural; distant	10,000/ 9,000	Public; Master's University (large programs)
University E	Medium city	8,000/ 7,000	Private; Doctoral/ Research University
University F	Town; fringe	23,000/ 16,000	Public; Doctoral/ Research University
University G	Large suburb	10,000/ 7,000	Private; Master's University (larger programs)

Source: National Center for Education Statistics, Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching

II. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Key Observations

- ❖ **A multi-pronged approach is common among the most successful senior-year programs. Integrating social components, curricular instruction, and “real world preparation” workshops enables student affairs departments to address all transitional concerns under one programmatic umbrella.**
- ❖ **Some universities offer “senior seminars”: these classes encourage students to reflect upon, and derive meaning from, their undergraduate education in preparation for the future.**
- ❖ **The incorporation of alumni, particularly young alumni, is vital to senior programs at contact institutions; this involvement provides both career networking opportunities for seniors and a working example of post-graduate service to the alma mater institution.**
- ❖ **Several institutions offer a comprehensive series of preparatory workshops with topics such as “Buying v. Leasing a Car,” “Service Opportunities in the Real World,” and wine tasting. An informal lecture format attracts a greater number of students.**
- ❖ **Social programs are the backbone of several senior-year transition programs. Engaging the students with one another not only provides a means of celebrating the undergraduate experience, but also brings about a stronger sense of identification to the graduating class and to the institution. The program at University G stresses student involvement in the community. Seniors can participate in multiple service activities and enjoy several opportunities to learn about local culture through specialized tours of the local city.**
- ❖ **The most popular events that celebrate the senior year are built into existing university traditions, such as football games or a long-established “last lecture” series.**
- ❖ **Contacts suggest the availability of alcohol increases attendance at certain events, but quality of programming is what truly matters for student buy-in: alcohol is what “gets students in the door,” but entertainment and relevance of offerings keeps students returning to additional events.**
- ❖ **Of those institutions which administer senior programming through student affairs, all institutions have a dedicated staff person responsible for planning and executing senior events, enabling consistency throughout all events and providing students with a central contact for communicating and inquiring about senior programs.**
- ❖ **Contacts stress that the most successful senior year programs are not stand-alone; rather, they are the culmination of four years’ worth of transitional and preparatory programming.**
- ❖ **The idea of a “senior year experience” is only a few years old, making it difficult to measure the impact of programming on the alumni experience.**

III. PROFILE: UNIVERSITY F

Programming for the Senior Year Transition

The senior transition program at the **University F** provides social, programmatic, and curricular opportunities for senior development and engagement. Administered through the office of student affairs, the program comprises a for-credit course, non-credit workshops, and multiple social events, including a comprehensive schedule of “senior week” activities.

Curricular Component: Transitioning out of college

University F offers a ten-week, one-credit course specifically for students in their final year of undergraduate study. The course meets twice weekly, with lecture presentations during the first meeting, and students joining a 15-person discussion section for the second meeting. Lectures are generally delivered by guest experts, who cover such topics as:

- ✓ *Making Good Financial Decisions*
- ✓ *Salaries and Benefits*
- ✓ *Buying A Car*
- ✓ *Resume and Cover Letter Writing*
- ✓ *Interviewing and Professional Behavior*
- ✓ *Job Searching*
- ✓ *The World of Work*
- ✓ *Graduation Preparation and Staying Connected to University F*

During the discussion section, students share their reflections upon lecture topics, and are encouraged to consider ways to integrate lecture content into their undergraduate history and future plans.

Workshops: Preparing for the future

For students who do not enroll in the credited course, the office of student affairs offers numerous workshops. Offered in a “drop in” format, these workshops cover a variety of topics, including the popular “Grad School 101”. This series of one-hour courses provides students with a range of support pertaining to graduate schools, including test preparation, financing an advanced degree, and leveraging alumni association contacts.

Social Programming: Kicking off the senior year

University F undertakes several large-scale social programs annually. One of the most popular, called Countdown to Commencement, is held during the first semester and attended by nearly half of the graduating class. This event is sponsored by the office of student life, the alumni association, and outside vendors. Students can stop in and order class rings, caps and gowns, and diploma frames; there are also games and giveaways that celebrate the senior year. A t-shirt reading “Almost Done” is given away annually by the office of student life to every attending senior. The Council’s contact notes that this t-shirt has become iconic around campus and that seniors will attend Countdown to Commencement specifically to obtain one. The contact adds that making this a social event has been the most successful way to ensure that seniors are taking care of graduation preparations (i.e. caps and gowns).

III. PROFILE: UNIVERSITY F

Senior Week: Celebrating the end of the undergraduate experience

The University F has had great success in their senior week programming. Council contacts note that approximately 50-60% of the senior class participates in at least one event during this week, when the office of student life plans several large-scale activities to take place between the end of final exams and graduation day; these activities are intended to be “social, fun, but also impactful.” Below is an overall description of the largest Senior Week events.

Senior Week Programs		
Event	Cost	Description
“The Secrets of University F” bus tour	Free	Registered students participate in a guided bus tour of the campus, exploring places that are “off limits to the average student” and “places you never knew existed” (i.e. the personal office of the president). Council contact adds this event, specifically, adds an important sense of tradition to the Senior Week festivities.
Senior Comedy Cabaret	Free	One evening during senior week, the on-campus performing arts center hosts a senior comedy show; the addition of a cash bar improved attendance.
Senior Fiesta	Free	This general social event is an opportunity for seniors to enjoy one last party together. Co-sponsored by the Alumni Association, and held at their building, the event is also meant to introduce students to AA services available to them after graduation, and to AA facilities.
Mohegan Sun trip	\$20	For a small fee, seniors can attend this Friday night trip to a nearby casino. The event reaches capacity quickly but is the most popular.

III. PROFILE: UNIVERSITY F

Administering the Senior Year Experience

The director of senior year transitions and engagement programs at University F cites several key administrative steps that enable all senior year programs to run smoothly and interact seamlessly.

Inter-departmental Cooperation

Multiple campus offices hold a stake in senior year programming: office of student life, career services, the Alumni Association, etc. At University F, the creation of a **Senior Programming Board** has helped to unify and direct all offices' efforts. Key functions include:

- ✓ **Determination of common goals.** By bringing together multiple stakeholders, the Senior Programming Board can identify overlaps in services. In acknowledging these overlaps, new programs can be developed (and older programs improved).
- ✓ **Sharing of services.** Establishing close working relationships with other offices reduces burdens on the office of student life in areas like event planning, event staffing, marketing and publicity.
- ✓ **Financial co-sponsorships.** Bringing together multiple offices to co-sponsor events prevents the office of student life from having to finance all events.

Centralizing Information

Providing students with centralized sources of information has proven helpful at the University F. Programs, events, and senior year news are centralized as follows:

Centralization Methods	
Source	Description
Dedicated staff member	A single staff member who works out of the office of student life provides a “face” to senior programs. Students know that this staff member is dedicated to the senior experience and can answer any and all questions about graduation and transitioning. This staffer is involved with developing course curricula, coordinates the Senior Programming Board, and generally oversees all senior events, thus ensuring seamless integration of all aspects of the senior year program.
Senior E-News	A monthly bulletin sent out during the second semester to all graduating students, this bulletin reminds seniors not only of social and programming opportunities, but also important deadlines for diploma declarations, information about taking yearbook photos, tips for job seekers, etc.
Website	This comprehensive website features everything a senior needs to know about the senior programs and about graduation. Seniors can find information about event registration, dates, and course information, site features include an interactive calendar of events and online tutorials covering budgeting, credit, and finance. This online “one-stop shop” makes answers widely accessible and convenient for students.

IV. SENIOR SEMINAR: CURRICULAR COMPONENTS

In addition to **University F**, **University C**, **University A**, and **University D** all offer for-credit courses designed to support seniors during their transition out of the undergraduate experience. The following chart describes the administrative aspects of these courses.

Course Models	
School	Course Specifics
University C	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Three-credit, graded course • Approximately 4 sections per semester of 20 students each (optional course) • Run in a hybrid (part online, part classroom) format • Course has one faculty facilitator, most lectures are delivered by expert guest alumni speakers • Combines transitional and career preparation information
University A	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One-hour module integrated into existing three-hour, discipline-specific capstone courses • Curriculum developed by general education department and approved by faculty senate • Mandatory for all seniors • Developed around the question of, "What is a meaningful life?"
University D	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Terminal component of four-year curricular program, mandatory for all students • Students engage in small discussion-based classes, grouped according to major area of study • Depending on discipline, seminars are primarily aimed at preparing students for graduate school or career

Please see attached syllabi for more detailed descriptions of course offerings.

Spotlight Strategy: Creating a Senior Portfolio

At **University C**, the senior capstone seminar includes a cumulative portfolio project. This project can be completed in a variety of formats, including electronically, and provides students the opportunity to reflect upon their undergraduate achievements. As the Council contact notes, "Seniors are so busy preparing to graduate that they forget what they have done over the past four years." In completing a senior portfolio, seniors look back on their greatest accomplishments and begin to understand their past successes. Council contact asserts that, armed with this knowledge, seniors graduate with a greater degree of self-knowledge and confidence.

V. PREPARATORY PROGRAMMING

Practical Preparation: Workshop series

All council contacts cite the importance of preparing students to transition not just to a career, but to the responsibilities of adulthood. Several institutions run programs similar in format to the aforementioned **University F** programs: offered in a drop-in format, either for a nominal fee or free of charge, and administered either entirely through the office of student life, or under a partnership between student life and career services. Notably, at **University A**—where the senior-year capstone is a graduation requirement—these workshops operate under a separate non-credit, co-curricular program, titled “University A and Beyond.” Many capstone facilitators, however, will require students to attend specific sessions that tie in particularly well with topics covered in the seminar.

University G’s Workshop Series

At **University G**, one-hour workshops are planned throughout the spring semester. Held in late afternoons and evenings, the schedule of courses has included such topics as:

- Healthy Meals in Minutes
- W2401KHMO (*demystifying employment benefits*)
- Money 101
- Life After Villanova
- Wine Tasting

The classes typically attract 40-50 attendees and most are taught by a young alumnus, which also presents a career networking opportunity for students. The schedule of courses is first sent to students’ home addresses over the winter break; contacts state that educating parents about preparatory resources has increased attendance over the past several years. The key to the program’s success is the lighthearted, casual nature of programming.

Experiential Preparation: Senior Conference

University E hosts a “Senior Conference” each January for its graduating class. For a fee of \$100, students can register for this two-and-a-half-day event, held at an off-campus hotel and conference center. Students are responsible for checking in to the hotel and for registering for individual workshops over the course of the weekend, providing them with a “real-life conference experience.” The weekend incorporates numerous opportunities to network with alumni and culminates with a formal etiquette dinner, taught by a local expert that concludes with a toast to the senior class. The event traditionally fills to capacity at approximately 200 students.

Virtual Preparation: Online tutorials

In an effort to reach an even wider audience, both **University F** and **University E** offer videos and transcripts of workshops on their websites. Students can work through various tutorials and conferences at times that are most convenient to their own schedules.

VI. SOCIAL COMPONENTS

Social events for seniors at contact institutions generally fall into one of two categories: those events held in the fall semester and early spring semester, and those events held in the weeks immediately leading to commencement.

Events early in the senior year: Celebrating the future

Generally, those events held earlier in the academic year are intended to engage seniors with one another, to remind them that graduation is impending, and to encourage the soon-to-be graduates to make the most out of their final months. Council contacts attest that earlier programming focuses students on the short time remaining; this awareness in turn engenders a greater degree of commitment to, and interest in, the institution and its offerings. In addition, programming that starts earlier in the year brings about a greater sense of class identification.

- **Leverage existing university traditions.**

Both **University E** and **University G** build seniors-only programming around already-popular sporting events. The office of student life at **University E** holds a tailgate for seniors prior to the last home football game of the season. For a \$5 admissions fee, students have access to food and drink and receive a t-shirt reading, "Ready to Change the World." This t-shirt has "become iconic" around campus and seniors will attend the tailgate just to receive the shirt. **University G** runs a parallel event during football season and repeats the tailgate prior to a home basketball game; at the basketball tailgate, attendance is upwards of 600 students.

- **Use a theme to attract students.**

At **University B** and **University G**, students are reminded of their impending graduation with the annual "100 Days Party." Offices of student life at both institutions rent out a local bar near campus. At **University G**, the bar charges a \$5 cover, which is donated back to the senior class; **University G** also reports more than 800 students (or 50% of the senior class) in attendance at this event. **University B** repeats this party at 50 days, and **University G** includes a "Three Days" party during its senior week.

Spotlight Strategy: University B

The **University B** Class of 2009 for four years witnessed extensive construction on their campus. When much of the work remained incomplete for the start of their senior year, the office of student life planned a "Hard Hat Party." Seniors were invited to a reception that featured food and bar; hard hats were required because the party was held in the active construction zone. Following the party, seniors wore their hard hats to the first basketball game of the season, and to a seniors-only concert following the game. Assigning the "hard hat" theme to the party, as well as building it around a basketball game, served to "get seniors excited about being seniors" and was a "huge success," according to the senior year program coordinator.

- **Engage seniors with one another while engaging with the local community and culture.**

Events held at **University G** enable students to become more closely connected with their surroundings during the senior year. Held every September, the Senior Service Day enables participating students to perform community service at various community agencies throughout the greater geographic region. Seniors are placed at sites in groups of anywhere from ten to fifty. This event serves to build camaraderie between seniors while strengthening individual relationships with the community. Later in the fall, the seniors program partners with a local company to offer a "City Food Tour". For a small fee, seniors can join a guided tour throughout a nearby large city that intersperses brief cultural history presentations with stops at well-known eateries.

VI. SOCIAL COMPONENTS

Events in the final semester: Celebrating the past

Events scheduled immediately prior to graduation are generally intended to be a celebration of four years of hard work, and these events serve as a university-wide farewell to the graduating class. Events of this type can be further divided: those that are purely social or entertainment-based, and those that have more of a reflective tone.

Final Events		
Event	School	Description
Last Lecture	University G	During the last semester, seniors are asked to nominate professors to deliver the "last lecture." Nominees are narrowed to four finalists, who are again voted upon by the senior class. At 4:30pm on the final day of classes, the previously unannounced winning professor delivers his or her last lecture to the senior class. At the lecture's conclusion, champagne is distributed to attendees and the professor toasts the senior class. Attendance is generally upwards of 500.
Senior Toast	University E, University B	At University E, a senior toast is held at 6pm on the final day of exams: exactly one hour after seniors' grades are due to the registrar. The soon-to-be graduates gather in front of the student center for a champagne toast delivered by a senior member of the faculty; attendance is generally between 600 and 700 students (more than one-third of the graduating class). The University B Senior Toast is held on the Friday before graduation, and seniors are invited along with their families. At this event, the toast is delivered by the university president and attendance is generally upwards of 4,000.
Senior Breakfast	University B	This formal breakfast is held on the day between the end of classes and the start of final exams. At the breakfast, graduation speakers are announced, as are award recipient and honor society inductees. Held free of charge, attendance is generally about 2,000 students (roughly 50% of the class).
Senior Week	University G, University B	Similar to University F, University G and University B each run a comprehensive series of events immediately prior to commencement. These programs are primarily social in nature; notably, University G's programming also includes a parent-child golf outing, a formal dinner dance, and a large-group community service event.

VII. MARKETING & MEASURING THE SENIOR EXPERIENCE

Student Buy-in: Effective strategies to encourage student participation

Council contacts uniformly agree that without a degree of student buy-in, even the most effective programming is lost on an unresponsive audience. By administering year-specific programs throughout the undergraduate experience, creating a single marketing strategy for all events, and making events visible on campus, offices of student life can increase student participation and event popularity.

- **Focus on a four-year transition.** As spoken by Council contact at **University E**, the most important part of senior programming is that, “It doesn’t start in the senior year.” When offices of student life are consistent with programming (social or otherwise) across all four years, seniors are more likely to take advantage not just of social events, but preparatory programs as well.
- **Brand the senior experience.** At **University G** and **University B**, senior year programs exist as their own brands. The program at University G has a presence on various social networking sites that are regularly updated with information about upcoming events and graduation requirement deadlines. The creation of a single name and visual logo to coordinate all aspects of the senior year transition creates a cohesive and easily recognizable brand associated with an entire slate of programs and services.
- **Plan visible events.** The large tailgates at **University E** and **University G**, along with the **University B** “Hard Hat Party” are all highly public; the t-shirt giveaway at University E makes the seniors-only event even more visible. Underclassmen witness these seniors-only events and look forward to the privilege of participation in the senior year.

Outcomes of senior year programming: Qualitative feedback

Regardless of programming category—curricular, preparatory, or social—contacts attest that outcome analysis, particularly quantitative measurement, is difficult at best. Anecdotally and generally, however, nearly all contacts assert the positive impact of their programs on students’ future success.

- The **University F** has seen an increase in seniors purchasing Alumni Association memberships, which can be taken as an indicator of a stronger affinity for the institution, as well as a desire to remain connected with the university in the future.
- **University D**’s career-oriented senior seminar has resulted in a greater proportion of seniors securing jobs before graduation.
- At institutions with a focus on social programming, student attendance rates are viewed as indicators of success. Generally, a 30% or higher participation rate from the senior class constitutes a highly successful event.

Professional Services Note

The Advisory Board has worked to ensure the accuracy of the information it provides to its members. This project relies on data obtained from many sources, however, and The Advisory Board cannot guarantee the accuracy of the information or its analysis in all cases. Further, The Advisory Board is not engaged in rendering clinical, legal, accounting, or other professional services. Its projects should not be construed as professional advice on any particular set of facts or circumstances. Members are advised to consult with their staff and senior management, or other appropriate professionals, prior to implementing any changes based on this project. Neither The Advisory Board Company nor its programs are responsible for any claims or losses that may arise from any errors or omissions in their projects, whether caused by The Advisory Board Company or its sources.

© 2009 The Advisory Board Company, 2445 M Street, N.W., Washington, DC 20037.

Any reproduction or retransmission, in whole or in part, is a violation of federal law and is strictly prohibited without the consent of the Advisory Board Company. This prohibition extends to sharing this publication with clients and/or affiliate companies. All rights reserved.