Final Report from Sub-Committee on Senior Year

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Background

One of the recommendations of the 21st Century Committee was to “examine the senior year, paying particular attention to the senior integrative exercise and the transition out of Carleton.” This recommendation was passed along to the ECC in the Fall of 1998. The full text from their final report follows:

The senior year, like the first year, is one of transition and change. Yet in our discussions with students, faculty, and staff in the Division of Student Affairs, there was a widespread sense that for many of our students this important capstone year is less successful than it could be. The fourth-year experience needs rethinking. For example, there appears to be too much unevenness among Senior Integrative Exercises (Comps). Carleton should take a more active role in making the senior year a period for closure, reflection, and planning. Because we believe in our philosophy that a four-year residential experience is important for the intellectual and personal growth of our students, we need to think carefully about what we hope to accomplish during this important final year.

We recommend that the ECC and the Faculty, working in close cooperation with staff from the Student Life area, review the Senior Residency Requirement and undertake an analysis of the senior year, Comps, and the ways in which we support students in making important decisions about their futures. Possible questions include: should Comps be expanded to become a more complete year-long or two-term capstone experience? Should they be completed before spring term? Should distribution requirements be completed before the senior year?

Procedure

The ECC constituted a sub-committee in the Fall Term of 1998, consisting of Clara Hardy (Classics), George Lamson (Economics), Chris Oatis-Skinner (Career Center), Steve Davis (Academic Support), Josh Meskin (’99), and Jordan Kolar (’97, Admissions). In our initial meetings, we determined that we would approach our project of examining the senior year experience under the three broad categories of comps, transition (either to work or graduate school), and closure. We asked chairs of all departments or programs to send us material outlining not only their comps process, but other curricular activities their seniors normally engaged in. The information we received from this request is tabulated in Appendix A. Jordan Kolar and Josh Meskin ran two focus groups for seniors, summarized in Appendix B. We also received very helpful survey data, with comparison results from comparable institutions, from the office of Institutional Research (COFHE Senior Survey 1998 and Alumni Survey (Five Years Out) from the class of 1991: Appendix C). In addition to these sources of information specific to Carleton, our committee did some reading around in the growing literature on the senior year. Chris Oatis-Skinner was able to attend a
national teleconference on the topic at University of St. Thomas. Materials from this conference are included in appendix D.

The following issues emerged in the three areas we examined. First, on comps. There are clearly enormous advantages named by all three sources (faculty, seniors, alums) to engaging in independent work in the senior year: a real sense of ownership of an intellectual area; the opportunity to extend thought on a topic beyond the constraints of the usual nine and a half weeks; the self-knowledge gained from such a self-directed endeavor; the honing of a wide array of discipline-specific skills, and so forth. Yet there were also a number of consistent problems named in particular by current seniors: the stakes are so high that students are entirely consumed by the process while it is going on, to the detriment of their capacity to deal with issues of transition and closure; often departments’ formal preparation for and feedback during the process are not in proportion to the work students are doing; co-ordination between different advisors is frequently problematic; goals are not always clear, and in some cases feel inappropriate for students not continuing in the field; and finally the very high degree of variation in the process among different departments is seen by seniors as unfair given the status of comps as a college-wide requirement. Workload was the major difficulty mentioned by faculty: even departments expressing high satisfaction with their comps process felt overburdened by running it on top of their normal teaching load.

On issues of transition and closure there was perhaps a less unified response from our differing information sources. The main area of agreement was that seniors lacked time and energy to give to these areas. While our career center looked very good in relation to those of our peer institutions according to the COHFE survey, students still had misconceptions about what resources they could get from it, and when they needed to seek those resources.

Some significant improvements in the college’s attention to senior transitions have come about during the course of our study, and we wanted prominently to note these in our report: first, the shifting of the Honors Convocation to the afternoon slot, and the reception that followed, is a wonderful innovation that will allow seniors some special time with faculty well before those frantic last minutes of graduation, and should help them to start thinking about issues of closure in a more timely fashion than was the case before. Second, the office of Residential Life has loosened its policy on moving seniors out of their dorms the afternoon of Commencement, and will allow them to spend that night there; this is a sizable improvement and seniors will be very grateful! Third, the co-curricular support group for senior year transitions met through the spring for the second year, and finished by planting a lilac bush between Great Hall and Willis, a tradition they hope to continue. And fourth, the Chaplain’s Office devoted a Chapel service to the issue of Transitions for seniors. It is through co-curricular activities and support in areas like these that we feel closure and transitional issues can be most successfully dealt with, and we applaud these steps forward.

**Recommendations**

To address the issues outline above, our committee makes the following recommendations:
COMPS:
Departments are highly invested in their individual comps processes, and variation across departments seems to be a fundamental part of Carleton culture in many ways. We would however like to recommend that the faculty engage in a discussion of the institutional comps requirement in some forum (perhaps faculty break-out sessions, or at the faculty retreat). For this purpose, we offer for discussion the following proposal: that the college-wide graduation requirement of “Integrative Exercises” as described in the Academic Catalog, p. 12, be replaced by a Capstone Project within each major. Each department would be free to design whatever capstone experience they felt would be most beneficial to their majors; majors would be capped at 72 credits. Departments would be allowed to assign teaching credit to this process as they deemed appropriate, with approval of the Dean.

We feel that moving the requirement into the major, where in fact it already resides, and allocating teaching credit to its oversight, would solve the problems of invidious comparisons across majors by students, as well as the disproportionate amounts of time and effort students and faculty devote to the process. If departments are allowed and encouraged to design capstone projects organically integrated with their major curricula, some of the issues concerning goals and preparation for the project might also be addressed.

If the ECC does not pass that proposal and recommend it to the faculty for discussion, or if the proposal fails to be voted in by the faculty, we have a series of less sweeping recommendations for departments to consider. We would start with the following recommendations for an ideal comps experience:

- Comps materials should clearly articulate not only the process expected, but the educational goals of the exercise, both for those planning to continue in the field and those who will not (many departments already do this; Art History’s material is exemplary).
- Departments should make sure that their curriculum offers sufficient coaching in whatever skills (e.g. research; writing of long papers; oral presentation) will be necessary to students once they begin their comps.
- Ideally departments should offer some flexibility both in when the heaviest work falls in the year (i.e. Fall or Winter term), and in type of project (as English, for example, now allows either a long paper or an exam).
- Departments should be encouraged to remember the 6 credits their students receive for comps, and manage expectations accordingly.
- Departments should ensure some mechanism for incorporating student feedback on the process in a regularized manner, so that as they make alterations in their process from year to year student response is taken into consideration.

ADVISING:
Many of the issues coming out of our study seem to be resolvable through increased college attention to junior and senior year advising. This advising process has historically been much more successful than first-year advising, since there is already a purposeful relationship between faculty member and student at this point. Thus it does not seem too difficult to ask advisors of seniors to pay attention not only to academic requirements, but
some other issues as well, notably how a student plans to make the transition out of Carleton. The Career Center in fact already offers services that would address some of the issues that came out of the focus groups; the problem seems more to be just one of getting students to use the services.

We therefore feel that the current Faculty Career Coordinators program might become the vehicle for collaborative approaches to career and academic advising. FCC’s working with the Career Center could help advisors to encourage a holistic program of study in the senior year.

As the Dean provides a session each year for advisors of first-year students, regular gatherings of advisors of upper-level students would be useful for the discussion of available resources and appropriate topics of advising conversations. Some suggestions follow:

Spring term of the Junior year, when discussing registration for the following fall, advisors could:
• Help students coordinate their comps process with their preparations for the next year. If most of the work in grad school or fellowship applications, or in a job search, occurs during the Fall, then they should arrange their comps work, if possible, to fall more heavily in the Winter. If their interests are in an area where the recruiting occurs rather in Winter or Spring, they could shift their heaviest comps load to the Fall, etc.
• Suggest that students consider registering for fewer credits, if this is possible, during the terms in which the most stressful work will occur.
• Give students a packet of information, prepared with the Career Center and FCC’s, highlighting career search resources of interest to the student.

Both at this advising session and at those that follow in the Senior year, advisors could:
• Ask students to start reflecting on their Carleton experience as a whole, and deciding in that context which courses they might like to take in their last few terms. If appropriate, advisors could remind students that the SCRUNCH option exists to encourage such exploration and curricular risk-taking.
• Urge students to consider very carefully the repercussions of being off-campus for any part of the senior year. We have not felt that there was any compelling reason to preserve the residency requirement insofar as it restricts study off-campus (but see final recommendation below). There are costs associated with a term away during the senior year, however, and advisors should make certain that students are making good choices in the full knowledge of the consequences for comps, the job search, graduation, and their general transition out of college.

CAREER CENTER
• In order to facilitate the coordination with senior advisors outlined above, as well as to provide the services we feel that students are demanding from the Career Center, we recommend that there be some increase in the available individual counseling time, perhaps with the upgrade to full-time of the current half-time Career Counselor position. In addition, the enthusiastic consensus from the students about the value of Alumni connections seems to us to warrant a new position in the Career Center to facilitate the coordination of alumni mentors and networking.
CLOSURE
• One of the stress factors that came out of the senior focus groups had to do with the very short time available to seniors to move out of their dorms after Commencement. We recommend that this policy be relaxed to allow Seniors to have until the following noon to be out of their rooms. As this is an Alumni relations issue, we recommend that the Alumni Office consider contributing resources to make the extra time possible for those seniors who would like it.
• The Alumni Dinner for Seniors could explicitly address the various transitions that happen as Seniors graduate from Carleton, although we think it would be a good idea to invite seniors to begin their reflection at a point rather earlier than this.
• One suggestion from the focus groups was that some special event for seniors be staged earlier in the Spring Term to get them started on this transition, much as there is a camping trip over mid-term break for Fall term first-year students. We feel that this kind of event is worth discussing.

RESIDENCY
In closing we address one of the specific areas of our charge, the long-unenforced senior residency requirement. Our committee did not feel that it would be beneficial for the College to prevent students from pursuing off-campus study or credit internship opportunities in their senior year (given intelligent advising, as specified above). On the issue of graduation in 11 terms, however, we did not reach consensus. On the one hand it seems evident that the financial incentives to finishing in 11 terms can pressure a student to squeeze too much into his or her last two terms so as to not enroll for the third, raising the stress levels. In addition, many students not enrolled still live in town and work on their comps, expecting to be able to use career center, library, studio, and faculty resources. On the other hand, financial pressures are very real, and some felt that enforcing 12 terms of tuition-paying was an unjustified hardship on struggling families. This is clearly not simply a faculty decision, and it isn’t clear to us what the appropriate forum for its discussion would be. I would like to see discussion somewhere, though, of the possibility of part-time enrollment with a proportional tuition break. This might be a compromise position, which would allow some financial relief without demanding an all or nothing decision about one of the last three terms.

Respectfully submitted,
the Senior Year Experience Sub-Committee: Clara Hardy, George Lamson, Josh Meskin, Chris Oatis-Skinner, Steve Davis, and Jordan Kolar.