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Devon B. Corbett
Merrimack College

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Exploring Transition through the Senior Year Experience

Devon B. Corbett

Merrimack College

Abstract

Senior year is a busy time for most college students as they are preparing for their upcoming transition into adulthood. They are constantly answering the question “What are you doing after graduation?” This results in many college seniors pulling away from their community in order to focus strictly on their major field of study and less on their upcoming transition (Henscheid, 2008). Senior Year Experience programs are a way colleges can provide intentional programming to support college students throughout this transition into adulthood. The purpose of this study was to explore existing Senior Year Experience programs at other institutions with the intention of implementing a new program at Merrimack College. Focus groups involving senior students at Merrimack were conducted, to explore the resources these students have utilized on campus, and to document what they are most nervous about in their upcoming transition. The findings indicated that a Senior Year Experience or transitional program is necessary at this institution, and that many students requested support in areas such as life skills, counseling, maintaining relationships, and professional etiquette. The conclusion of this study recommends a senior retreat experience to be implemented through collaboration with various offices on Merrimack’s campus.

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Introduction

Senior year is a time of major life transition as many college students leave behind a culture they have come to know so well. This culture changes from that of a student education focused culture to a professional work culture. Author John N. Gardner (1998) described this major transition in *The Senior Year Experience*, and provides ways in which programs can be implemented in order to better support college seniors. He described the importance of achieving success and how it is defined differently by college students and working professionals. Through programs such as the Senior Year Experience, seminars, workshops, and retreats, students can focus on the transition they are about to make through career preparation, the emotional and spiritual process, and a plan for their future. Success can mean many different things for each student, as no two are alike. Through these programs they can find the guidance and support necessary to create their own personal success.

In this project, I explored the programs that are available to college seniors during their time of transition and how these programs help students advance in the necessary attributes, emotional support, and life skills needed in order to be successful. There has been a major focus on the transition from high school to college and how colleges can aid in each student's success, but not much focus on the transition from college to career. A college student spends four years or more receiving an education and paying tuition to earn a degree in hopes of receiving a job thereafter. I discussed the anxieties and struggles the post-graduate may face as well as the qualities employers feel college students lack. I examined specific programs that have been created to aid in this transition such as classes, workshops, retreats, internships, and events that are currently provided for college seniors (Gardner & Van der Veer, 1998). I have also discussed the other ways in which students find support through spirituality and religion, and the

importance of the faith and emotional development throughout college as according to Sinclair Powell, Tisdale, Willingham, Bustrum, and Allan (2012).

John N. Gardner and Gretchen Van der Veer (1998) defined a senior as a student in their final two semesters who has met their programs requirements and is ready to receive their degree. Students may attend school part time or require some time off. Therefore, the amount of time it takes to complete a degree may be longer than that of the 'traditional' senior, but they are still referred to as seniors, as they are making the difficult transition from school to career.

As higher education continues to sustain an increase in students attending college, it is critical that colleges and universities reflect on what students are doing after college and if they have supplied their students with the focused curriculum and resources necessary to get a job post-graduation. How exactly are colleges and universities preparing students for postgraduate life? Today it is quite often that we see students without jobs or who are making the necessary move to graduate school in fear that they do not know enough to hold a position within their undergraduate field of study (Schwartz, 2012). As Martha C. Nussbaum (2010) argued in *Not for profit: why Democracy needs the humanities*, it is of great importance to educate students to become well-rounded citizens, able to use critical thinking and to understand others. Senior seminars, experiences, courses and trainings are some of the missing pieces in most institutions in higher education.

Literature Review

There are many ways in which senior year transition programs are created and implemented in order to support students over the course of their transition. Research provides examples of programs that are very career focused and others that are constructed on the spirituality or emotional aspects of the student's transition (Yeadon, 2009). A more common approach is the support services that are most often offered by a career center such as internships, resume workshops and interview preparation. Other examples include seminar courses that are taken by the college senior in preparation for their last year of college academically, while providing the students with the life skills necessary for survival and success post-graduation. Another type of transitional program to support the college senior in transition are retreats which focus on the spirituality and emotional progress the student's make as they move forward in their life's journey. One example would be the existing Freshman Retreat experience at Merrimack College, which supports incoming first year students with their transition from high school to college through community building and keeping their faith.

Senior Year Programs: Overview and Effectiveness

John Gardner has provided extensive research on the Senior Year Experience and has shared his expertise through developing new programs and curriculum to support college seniors. According to Gardner and Gretchen Van der Veer (1998), a program defined as the Senior Year Experience, also known as SYE, is constructed by the institution's ability to reflect their mission statement and goals in a formalized curriculum in order to provide the college senior with the tools that are necessary beyond graduation. As an evolving program, one of the major goals is that students have these learning experiences inside and outside of the classroom. Gardner and Van der Veer (1998) discussed how reflection is also a major facilitator in these programs, as

students should be given the opportunity to reflect upon their own experiences, growth, development, integration, and the closure necessary to fulfill their college goals. SYE programs should also prepare students mentally, physically, and emotionally for the transition to life after college.

Another beneficial outcome of a senior year program or course is the ability to develop a mentorship with a professional in the student's field of study, a professor, or faculty member within their college or university. Through mentorships students can address academic and personal goals and insecurities. It is also extremely important that these programs and courses integrate the need for transitional skills beyond academia. They should focus on personal growth and experiences as well as the necessary life skills needed for life outside of school and work (Gardner & Van der Veer, 1998). Through a mentorship, students can have the one on one time to have these discussions and learn from someone who is already in their field.

One of the most effective ways to implement such programs is observed through institutions that hold both First Year and Senior Year Experiences. As students are exposed to the necessary academic and future career goals early on, they can develop an awareness and understanding of what is to come. Through these programs or courses students can reflect on their personal goals and development from freshman to senior year, as well as participate in self-assessment to measure their growth and development (Gardner & Van der Veer, 1998). A working example of a university who has taken what these authors refer to as the 'holistic academic approach' and has implemented both the First Year Experience as well as the Senior Year Experience into their curriculum is the University of Connecticut, also known as UCONN (University of Connecticut, 2015). In its sixteenth year, UCONN's program offers multiple courses and seminars and also develops mentorships amongst new and existing students

(UCONN First Year Experience, n.d.). UCONN has also developed a SYE course for all seniors that is one credit and offers lectures in various topics such as graduation preparation, resume and cover letter writing, basic money management, buying a car, interview and job preparation, overview to insurance, job searching, the world of work and graduate school, and how to stay connected to their university. In addition to the lectures students are also required to register for a discussion panel which allows them the opportunity to discuss what they learned and the transitions they will be making in order to apply it to their own lives (UCONN Senior Year Experience, n.d.).

These programs or courses involve the unification of academic and student affairs professionals to allow for the experience of small and large group work, in order for students to approach real life situations with the quality skills that employers search for in applicants such as, teamwork, consensus-building, and decision making skills. Programs will also focus on personal adjustment and transition. The goal is to not only educate students on career goals, but also on preparing students for post-college transition and each student's transition styles. This type of training reflects the process of the ways in which we prefer to learn, as we also have preferred ways to adapt to change. The SYE courses or programs have been designed to emphasize new transitions and provide forums where students can ask questions regarding careers, goals, and life skills, as well as personal questions, experiences and concerns about their upcoming transition (Gardner & Van der Veer, 1998).

In order for employers to be comfortable with hiring students right out of college, some colleges and universities have developed senior transition programs to introduce students to the professional skill sets they need to be successful. Yeadon (2009) stated in her research on college student transitions that the education of future employment does not only lie in the hands of the

academic departments, but is a responsibility of student affairs as well. Transition programming can be beneficial and helpful in many different forms such as seminars, workshops, retreats, or a lecture series. Offices such as career services and alumni relations are also another helpful resource to incorporate in a transitional program for college seniors (Yeadon, 2009). Student affairs professionals can play a key role in providing students with education or programming in skills such as communication, leadership skills, teamwork, and coordinating student events.

There is a serious need for these transitional programs as employers feel that recent graduates lack the basic skills of time management, flexibility, problem solving, and written and verbal communication. Through extensive research on the topic of senior transition, Yeadon (2009) also expressed the need for these programs due to the lack of knowledge on managing a budget, choosing insurance, completing a human resources packet, and getting a mortgage. Upon receiving a job, students no longer have the connection and constant feedback they once had in college. Students are living the reality that they are now on their own, where structure and support are limited throughout the transition from college to the workplace. It is up to both student affairs and academic professionals to provide students with the knowledge and skill sets upon graduation (Yeadon, 2009).

Yeadon (2009) mentioned specific goals such as competencies that are needed for the workplace, adjustment and career preparation, promoting practical life planning, and following up with seniors as they transition to alumni. Yeadon (2009) also discussed the connection of professional staff with recent graduates and how they can continue to connect and follow-up with one another. This is an example of support a transitional program can provide, as it will see the student all the way through the process. Checking in, especially within the first 90 days of a

student's first position can be a great way to support the students, as well as a way to assess the program's success.

Keeping in touch with recent graduates is one of the greatest ways an institution can show their support, as they are still members of the institutions community. Jean M. Henscheid (2008) in "Institutional Efforts to Move Seniors Through and Beyond College," wrote that students need the support of SYE courses or experiences due to the loss of community students experience as they are pulling away from campus involvement and social programs in order to concentrate on their major fields of study and the finishing of their degrees. Through her research on college seniors in transition and the existing programs that support these students, Henscheid (2008) found that 75 percent of survey respondents define existing SYE programs or capstones to focus directly on the major fields of study and address only the connections between academic majors and the working world. She then confirmed that less than two percent of these programs actually focus on life skills, personal adjustments and how to handle transitions (Henscheid, 2008).

Another form of existing programs to support seniors in transition are career courses. An example of an SYE program development focused solely on career transition is Edward Freeman's (2012) "The Design and Implementation of a Career Orientation Course for Undergraduate Majors." His one credit course was found to be a beneficial program to introduce students to their major field of study and to help them find a career or passion beyond college. He recognized the challenges students are having with receiving a job after graduating and created a course addressing the issue along with the structure and support of career preparation. His course consisted of writing assignments and oral presentations that allowed students to assess their personal wants and desires in a career and how those careers fit their personalities.

The course also provided students with assignments that will implement future goals and achievements as students investigated their career paths and the steps they must take in order to get there (Freeman, 2012).

Freeman's (2012) course also focused on providing students with interviewing skills and job success. His plan was to prepare students with interview questions and the proper ways in which students should market themselves at the time of their interviews. He then held a mock interview in which working professionals in the student's major fields come and interview the students for practice and experience (Freeman, 2012). There was also a section in his courses provided for resume writing. This is an important skill to have and gain comfort in as resumes are constantly updated throughout one's career. Freeman's overall goal for the course was for students to analyze their major fields of study and choose a career focus in order to become aware of the next steps after college (Freeman, 2012). This program was extremely helpful in career development, but did not provide support for other topics and situations that arise during this period of transition.

Although Freeman's program was more focused on career preparation and selection, Gardner and Van der Veer (1998) supported his theory which pertains to a few of the goals in the overall description of the Senior Year Experience. Goals two through four in his plan address the cohesion of academic majors and career preparation, as they believe that it is crucial to the program or course that strategies are shared with students to help them link their academic major to the real world. They also praise the importance of business professionals and their contributions to the programs or courses. Gardner and Van der Veer (1998) suggested the incorporation of faculty and alumni support as guest speakers, members of advisory committees, and examples of past students who have applied theory and practice.

Experiential learning through internships is the best way to expose students to the integration of theory and practice, according to Gardner and Van der Veer (1998). In a study by Stephen B. Knouse and Gwen Fontenot (2008) they discussed the success of undergraduate internships and their ability to open the door to many opportunities after graduation. Knouse and Fontenot's (2008) study of business programs at the University of Louisiana Lafayette showed that students who hold an internship in college are more motivated and are more likely to get a job right after college than those who did not. Knouse and Fontenot came to this conclusion by comparing existing surveys and research on business majors who have obtained an internship as well as those who have not. The researchers also found that recruiters and employers find an applicant who has had an internship to be of more value (Knouse & Fontenot, 2008). Knouse and Fontenot (2008) summarized, "the study found that internships exposed students to ethical issues and global dimensions sometimes not gained through class work" (Knouse & Fontenot, p.62, 2008).

Students who have gained internship experience during their undergraduate careers are also better able to market themselves in interviews and meetings, as they have already developed the skills employers are looking for such as written and oral skills, the ability to work with a team or individually, and the ability to apply critical thinking and practical learning (Knouse & Fontenot, 2008). The skills they develop are applicable to their ability to now gauge realistic expectations in the working world. The authors asserted that most students who hold internships will want to work to make their current position into a full time position or have learned more about what they like or do not like about a job when applying for future positions in order to find the one that is best for them (Knouse & Fontenot, 2008). Gardner and Van der Veer (2008) supported this, and discussed the ease of transition for students who have already gained

experience outside of the classroom and are now more familiar with work cultures and the socialization from campus to career.

Internship opportunities set colleges apart from one another as well as providing an advantage to students who have the benefit of this experience. Internship programs are probably the most common form of the integration of theory and practice as well as the program closest to a senior experience, but like these programs, internships are not offered everywhere and are not always a required portion of a student's undergraduate experience. In an article "Degrees are Great but Internships Make a Difference," Brian Burnsed (2010) put into perspective by stating that in 2010 about 1.6 billion students graduated with their bachelor's degrees. This proves that an overwhelming amount of college graduates are job searching, and the best way to stand out from other candidates is to have had experience in your field, often through an internship. He then discussed how a GPA is no longer proof of what a student is capable of. Many students do well in school and have competitive GPAs but they lack the skills and experiences necessary for the work force (Burnsed, 2010). The value of an individual institution is their ability to provide meaningful experiences for their students, which must consist of courses, programs, seminars and internships in order for the graduates to find success. However, many programs still do not require their students to take part in an internship experience prior to graduation, which requires students to take initiative and create that experience for themselves.

The Role of Faith in the Senior Transition

In times of transition, students may rely upon other aspects of their identity, such as spirituality and religion. College is often a fertile time for students to explore their own relationship to faith. In one example of this exploration, Harold V. Hartley III (2004) examined the development of college students and their transition between assumed faith that was inherited

by family and culture, to an adult form of faith identity that examines faith and beliefs more critically. A study was conducted to assess the college senior's faith and the ways in which they have grown and developed in their faith throughout college. Sinclair Powell, Tisdale, Willingham, Bustrum, and Allan (2012) conducted this qualitative study by interviewing twelve college seniors who were of the traditional college senior age, between 21 and 23 years old. In the interviews the students were asked specific questions regarding their faith, such as what changes occurred in their faith during college, what factors affected this change, and what roles of relationships, mentorships, active searching, and exposure to diversity played a part in their faith development.

Based on each participant's response, Sinclair, Powell et al. (2012) began their research with focus areas that have been influential to a student's faith development in the past. The areas are mentoring, gender, active searching, and exposure to diversity. Through these examples we can understand that faith is most influential to students based on who has taught them or guided them, how they identify themselves and venture in search of self, and how exposure to other faith and backgrounds allows students to question or gain confidence in their beliefs.

After analyzing the interview process and the student's responses, Sinclair, Powell et al. (2012) found 39 meaningful concepts that were frequently mentioned. The researchers grouped the responses into three major themes: discovering self and an authentic connection with self, discovering others and an authentic connection with others, and discovering God and an authentic connection with God. The major themes were built upon a student's new experience, involvement on campus or in the church, acceptance, leadership, difficult times, questing, peer relationships, community, spiritual encounter, and reliance on God (Sinclair Powell et al., 2012).

Of the three themes that were developed, the most common was questing. This is where higher education institutions can develop or improve their programming by keeping in mind that students throughout their four or more years of college, are continuously on a quest to develop themselves. Sinclair Powell et al. (2012) discussed at the end of their study how the interviews helped the students in understanding their faith identity and experiences, as it allowed them the time to reflect. They also found that those who have mentors or staff members helping them over the course of their education may have had the opportunity to reflect upon their faith identity, but many of the students did not (Sinclair Powell et al., 2012).

Many religiously affiliated institutions currently provide students with a senior retreat, as a way to aid them in their transition process. Institutions such as the University of Notre Dame, Villanova University, and Boston College all have some form of a senior retreat. Although each experience is different they all result in the same goal to prepare their students for their upcoming transition. Notre Dame's senior retreat is held through their Campus Ministry program and is built upon the questions of how students are feeling about the future, how they will make the transition to the real world, and how is God calling them to transition from their Notre Dame experience? (University of Notre Dame, 2014). Villanova sends their seniors on a weekend retreat led by staff and faculty and incorporates the ability to listen and discern as students move forward into the future (Villanova University, 2014). Boston College sends their students on a retreat called Aloha, meaning hello and goodbye, as students are saying goodbye to their undergraduate programs and hello to their future endeavors. The retreat is not explained to be as religion-focused as the others, but offers more of a chance for students to have a relaxing time and feel at peace with what is coming next as they spend time with friends (Boston College, 2014).

Villanova University has conducted surveys on their senior retreat in order to assess the outcome and experience of each student. Through an email conversation with the retreat coordinator at Villanova, I was able to obtain the results of the surveys given out during last year's senior retreat. According to the surveys, a majority of the students who attended the retreat ranked their overall experience as excellent and that they would refer friends to the next retreat. Students felt that the retreat allowed them the time for deep reflection and that they felt more confident and hopeful for what is to come. They also mentioned how important it was for them to realize that they are not alone in this time of transition. In regards to change, students stated that they would like more time for small group work, one on one conversations, and journaling. Free time to discuss and meet new people was also a recommendation of the students who attended (J.P. Edwards, personal communication, November 3, 2014).

Through the research reviewed, it appears that each of the programs or courses have been successful but not enough colleges or universities have taken them on and made them a fundamental part of the students overall experience and/or curriculum. There is evidence that colleges are creating programs to support graduating seniors in achieving success, but due to the lack of initiation and incorporation of programs at colleges and universities, these efforts are inconsistent at best.

There are news stories that discuss the common plight of students who do not get jobs after college, or settle for a job they are not happy with just to pay their bills and their increasing student loans. In result of these situations, there are many versions of mild to severe depression, which is also known as "postparchment depression" (Wood, 2004). In Francis B. Wood's (2004) essay, she discussed the fact that students and employers believe that institutions must do a better job preparing college graduates for work and life after college. She referred to the term "crisis of

imagination,” (p.73) which describes how the anxiety and depression begin. Wood (2004) stated that students develop anxiety towards what is to come. They wonder what will they do after college? Will they find a job? Will they get into graduate school? Or will they make enough money to pay off their loans? In result they become what she refers to as “mentally paralyzed,” as they are unable to do anything due to the overwhelming stress and anxiety they have encountered from their lack of knowledge and support of their institutions (Wood, 2004).

Dr. Victor Schwartz (2012), medical director at the Jed Foundation, discussed the severity of post-graduate depression, what it stems from, and described how graduates begin to question their self-worth, as students are unable to find a job or have a plan. He noted that as they are trying keep up with their other college friends they begin to feel lost, excluded, hopeless and ultimately end up feeling powerless. Students will begin to not sleep or sleep all day, lack motivation to complete daily tasks, and possibly begin to drink heavily or smoke. He implied that this depression or anxiety comes from the trials and tribulations of finding a job after receiving an undergraduate degree, and the lack of resources present to support these new graduates (Schwartz, 2012). After college, change happens almost instantly and many students have a difficult time catching up.

The history of higher education suggests that the role of the university has changed over time. Smith’s (2012) article described how the university’s role was to prepare students for life after college. Thelin (2011) discusses how students who attended college were often wealthy and not necessarily looking for a career, but to rather join their family business or become leaders in their communities. However, Smith (2012) defines the relationship of university and student as the doctrine of *in loco parentis*, which means “in place of parent.” The focus of higher education was also lead by the English model, which facilitated the moral, social, and spiritual

development of the students, and in turn has been traded for a focus on research and scholarship, and little to do with the needs of students today (Smith, 2012).

As Nussbaum (2010) stated, there is a correlation of facts between her focus as well as Smith's (2012), in the idea of a degree that is lacking significant value. Nussbaum (2010) held a strong opinion of the development of a democratic citizen and one's ability to think critically through receiving a degree in higher education. The lack of programming and support for college seniors during their final semesters and throughout their four years suggests that Nussbaum's (2010) theory to be true. Higher education seems to have forgotten what Nussbaum (2010) refers to as "soul," one's ability to relate to others, take different perspectives, and grow. Nussbaum (2010) described how the history of higher education has changed drastically over the years and how it may be beneficial to look back and reevaluate the goals of higher education, specifically the availability of programs for seniors and their outcomes of producing well-rounded individuals (Nussbaum, 2010).

In this current trajectory there is room for progress in the future plans of higher education. Gardner and Van der Veer (1998) discussed how we must continue to focus on transitions at colleges and universities instead of just retention. A focus on bridging the connections in order to support students through transitional phases would be the next step in enhancing the college experience or curriculum. Nussbaum (2010) reminded us that currently, our focus is on producing students to make a profit immediately, rather than good citizenship, which in turn will result in the successful development of profit. By implementing these programs, courses, and resources, students will have support and an educated mindset in working towards their goals rather than the over production of 'robots' who choose careers based solely on profit (Nussbaum, 2010).

Although it may seem as though this is an easy fix and that colleges and universities should implement these programs into their curriculum immediately, there are still questions to be answered. Many have discussed the issues of college transitions and life after college and have implemented significant ideas in order to ease this phase in college life. More attention has been focused on FYE and transitional programs into college, leaving the SYE, to in a way, fend for itself. Being that these are fairly new programs there is still a lot of research to be done in terms of success. A lot has been done to advertise these programs and the theories used to back them up are enough proof to want to apply them to a curriculum. However, we may still wonder if the students who have graduated from these programs went on to achieve more success than those who did not and where the data is behind this. In this project, I have researched senior transitions and spoken with current seniors about the support they have received thus far at one religiously affiliated liberal arts college in the Northeast. I have identified ways in which we can strengthen these programs and implement my findings in order to increase the significance in student transitional programs in higher education institutions.

An SYE program can be extremely beneficial to a college student's development. We have seen examples of such programs, classes, workshops, retreats, internships, and experiences as described by Gardner and Van der Veer (1998) throughout this study. The implementation of these programs is crucial to the well-being of a college graduate's future. Yeadon (2009) discussed many examples and how the introduction of life skills and support are needed at the time of these transitions and thereafter. Internships, as mentioned by Knouse and Fontenot (2008), are another example of successful experiential learning for a student's future. A student's identity and beliefs also play a large part in this time of transition as students rely on their spirituality or religion to persist to graduation (Sinclair Powell et al., 2012).

Methods

This study assessed the needs of college seniors at Merrimack College who are beginning their transition from college to career. Through a qualitative approach, the constructivist paradigm was chosen for the research, as the researcher explored the authenticity of the existing programs for college seniors and how prepared they are for life after college. As Mertens (2009) defines the constructivist researcher, she explains that these researchers share the desire to understand the multiple social constructions of meaning and knowledge and how the participants perceive that social construction. It was important to me that I receive feedback from the current seniors participating in the study, in order to develop a retreat experience that will enhance their learning and better prepare them for life after college.

Two focus groups were held and consisted of Merrimack College seniors only. Participants were recruited for these focus groups through emails, and were also invited through word of mouth. Purposeful sampling was used to invite students from various student organizations and academic majors, as each student had a different experience depending on the clubs and organizations they belong to, as well as their academic majors. In order to reach this demographic, the researcher shared their recruitment email with other Graduate Fellows within the Higher Education program at Merrimack College, who then shared it with the seniors within their programs and departments.

In terms of human subject issues, this project was not particularly sensitive, as the participants only discussed their experiences of senior year and their plans for life after college. However, the researcher was aware that the topic may be emotional or triggering to some. Out of respect for the participants, the researcher was sure to make it clear that participants were free to remove themselves from the focus group at any time. Participants were given a consent form

which explained their confidentiality, and confirmed that their names and/or any form of identification would not be used.

A total of 11 Merrimack College students participated in the focus groups (see Appendix B). In each focus group, participants were asked questions about their upcoming transition and the resources on campus that have been beneficial to them in this process (See Appendix A). The responses from the focus groups were recorded and then transcribed. From the transcriptions, a list of codes was developed to identify the shared experiences amongst the participants. Through reduction and elimination the codes were then examined for areas of intersection. The remaining codes were developed into new groups based on common themes amongst the participants' responses. The themes were then applied to the research based on their frequency.

Findings

After the transcription and coding processes, common themes were developed across the participants' responses. Each theme was then applied to the research based on its frequency. Many participants spoke about how they were feeling about their senior year and how they have motivated themselves this year. They also reflected heavily on the college to career process and the resources and support they feel they need, as well as the potential need for more programming within their institution. Participants also discussed their upcoming transitions and how that has affected them emotionally. Most importantly, the participants voiced their need for support and made several suggestions as to how an institution like Merrimack College could do so. The findings will be explored in more detail below.

Reflections on Senior Year

The focus groups began with an opening question allowing the participants to begin to think about their senior year and all that they have experienced thus far. All of the participants were very open to talking about how their senior year was going and how they were feeling in that moment. Many participants discussed how they felt about the year and that overall everything was going well, but that they were also feeling stress and pressure in their busy schedules. A couple of participants even said that they were ready to move on. One of the most common themes discussed by the majority of the participants was how they were very unsure of their futures and their need to partake in every opportunity possible in order to prepare for what's to come. One participant discussed his experience in the following way:

My senior year really splits into two different, I mean obviously two different semesters, but really two different kind of feelings. First semester I didn't feel like I was a senior, I was just kind of going with the flow or whatever. I tried to kind of spread myself out and take advantage of opportunities. I think sometimes I did and sometimes I didn't. Now I'm ready to get out. I think it's tough to say what I'm going to be doing in five years or ten years because I don't know what I'm doing next year and I think there is more pressure from people outside this semester than there absolutely was last semester and of any of my first three years.

Another student described her experience and how she feels that her senior year is not quite as intense as she had anticipated it to be. One participant stated, "I feel like it's bittersweet and I'm kind of the opposite, I don't have as much work as I thought I would, so I think I have more time to realize like God, this is our last semester, our last year. So I'm getting all sentimental, like we've been here and we've made friends and all that stuff." It is clear that some participants in this study felt ready for the transition and are excited to move forward, whereas others are hesitant to leave behind certain aspects of the college experience behind. Each participant explained that they were at their own stage in this process. Participants also spoke

about the dynamic of their senior year and what has been helpful to them in order to progress from college to career.

The Transition Process

All of the participants discussed their anxiety for their upcoming transition and many spoke about fear or worrying about the things that they do not know or cannot control. Maintaining relationships, making the adjustment, learning life skills, and making important decisions were all mentioned by the participants. A common theme was the fear of the unknown. As one participant mentioned the stress of choosing a graduate program, other participants chimed in with their concerns: some said “Choosing the right grad program,” while another noted her anxiety “Just anticipating having to figure that out on your own and mentally prepare for that. I'm anxious to think about it.” One student discussed that the mixture of emotions was challenging, saying “I feel like it's just so many different emotions that we all have so much that we want say but we're just like we don't want to think about it but we have to.”

Just like any transition, many of the participants were concerned about what they will leave behind once they graduate college. Several participants mentioned how they are fearful of losing or maintaining relationships with friends, faculty, and staff, as well as letting go of their college experience all together. A majority of the participants would like to attend a senior year experience course or workshop and discuss these topics, as discussed by this participant:

I think definitely some of the topics should be about building relationships because you want to build relationships to like network and what not and then one should be like the whole... like put school aside now let's talk about the apartment stuff, and all that stuff, like when you know it's a good deal or not a good deal. Because that's some of the stuff we're not educated on, so I think if you push that type of stuff then everyone will go, where some people will kind of be like well, I've done the career stuff but if you really push the real life kind of thing then absolutely.

Another participant mentioned other topics that would be of great benefit to discuss in the senior year experience, saying “The leaving process definitely causes a lot of distress so I think it would be good for people to relax once in a while. I could use it right now.”

Schwartz (2012) explains the reasons behind postgraduate depression which reflects the participants’ worries in this study. It is becoming more common for students to experience some form of depression over the course of their transition from college to adult life, as the change and loss of certain support and relationships causes them a great deal of fear or anxiety (Schwartz, 2012). Students question their self-worth if they are unable to find a job or plan ahead once they graduate. One student's experience refutes these feelings and due to her experience she is more than ready to move on:

I think I've had a super different experience being a commuter student and feeling very disconnected from campus. So unfortunately, the idea of college and the connection of I guess friends that I didn't necessarily establish as much as I would have liked to, it's not something I'm going to miss because it didn't necessarily happen for me.

Unfortunately not all seniors feel the same way about leaving their college experience and friendships behind. We must consider the fact that the transition process affects each student differently, and how we can consider those students, such as commuters when planning effective programs or courses.

College to Career

The O’Brien Center for Student Success is the career support center on Merrimack College’s campus. In order to understand the frequency and use of the center, the participants in the study were asked to discuss whether or not they have visited the O’Brien Center and the type of resources they have sought from O’Brien. The majority of the participants have visited the center, but there were three who had not. Those who have visited the O’Brien Center have gone to receive help on resume and cover letter writing, and a few have sought support regarding

advising or an internship or externship experience. One participant who utilized the career center described his experiences:

I went there to [ask someone to]critique my resume, and learn how to build a resume. Secondly, I worked on my cover letter, which is a skill I really lack on, trying to make a cover letter. My career advisor has really helped me reach out to different recruiters and setting up a LinkedIn, and trying to find a job for the outside world, when I graduate. It's been really helpful.

Resume and cover letter writing, as well as career advising are all necessary resources for students to consider their next steps for their postgraduate plans. Several of the participants mentioned graduate school as their next step when asked about their career direction. Many of the participants discussed their plans to attend graduate school right away or at some point in their future. Others have mentioned working in a job within their field or having a backup plan for work. As stated in an example from one participant:

I have a couple different directions right now that I'm kind of waiting on. I want to be a teacher eventually, so applying for different teaching positions, and that goes along with coaching, which I have experience in. I want to get into a fellowship or just go straight into grad school or just become a residence director so that I can get a job right out of college as well as a deduction on getting an education.

Most of the participants in the focus group elaborated on their uncertainty of where they will be in the coming year and if they will have a job. Many felt stressed or overwhelmed by their thoughts on this subject. One participant spoke on his need for more experience and more education in order to achieve his career goals:

I'm not sure exactly what I'll be doing next year either. My internship expires by the end of the semester but if worse comes to worse, I have part time jobs I can fall back on. I'd say my goal is to be a CPA someday which requires for the test work experience and more school but I think I'm going to go for work experience first. I'm going to be spending the rest of my year looking to get a job to fulfill that for when I graduate.

Alternatives to work or graduate study were also mentioned in the focus groups in order for students to gain more real world experience. One participant has discussed the possibility to

take a year off to volunteer and develop more real world experience, “For me, as of yesterday I just finished applying for all of the jobs that I would like to do, so, yes I want to take like a year or two years to do AmeriCorps or do a year of service and then go back to school for clinical psychology. So... I'm in the process.”

Yeadon (2009) discussed the need for transitional programs and how they can be of support to students in crucial times such as the job search and the interview process. Many participants explained how they felt that they were prepared for the interview process and that it was not something that they were concerned about. However, many participants discussed their lack of knowledge when it comes to the job search and how finding a job is something that they are unsure of. One participant explained his view as follows:

I don't feel prepared at all to apply for anything. I've applied to some things and I haven't applied to some things, I'm getting help from you know, family, friends, things like that, so that's something that I wasn't prepared for at all. As for interviews I think I do just a very good job in general (laughs), in interviews so I'm not worried about it.

While discussing this topic, I learned that some academic major departments require the students to take a senior seminar course. This is dependent on the academic major and has been beneficial to some of the participants but not all. Although this course was mentioned a few times, the senior seminar course is not meant to prepare students for life after college, but to serve as a culminating experience for what they have learned in their academic major departments. The same participant discusses his senior seminar experience:

I'm an English major and yeah, we have a Senior Seminar for English, and it was actually a lot more useful than I thought it was going to be. I went into class thinking it was just going to be kind of a hashing open everything we've been through in three years so far. But actually it was about why literature is important and how to advocate, especially for the teachers, why what we're teaching is important and why we shouldn't lose funding whether it's higher education or all the way down to pre-schools. So it was more of a real world application, which was awesome. Unfortunately, you know the professors' changeover and any professor can do whatever they want.

Through talking with the participants, I discovered that some students believe that this course will be more like a senior year experience course and are disappointed once they realize that the course is not what they had hoped it would be. Another student with a course similar to the senior seminar did not find it to be quite as beneficial as a course on the senior experience and the skills necessary to move forward in a career after college:

I have a field experience component to the major psychology, and we either, depending on our career interests we either chose, I don't know what the other option is but I'm currently in the ethnography field experience course and I thought it was going to be a lot more encompassing of the career, professional development, and personal growth. But it's more strictly working on creating a 20-30 page ethnography in our internships. So, I think it kind of lacks in the area of kind of developing that senior year experience and what you need out of a class like that. I think it's more driven towards the goal of creating an ethnography granted that will help later. I think there are more developmental skills that myself and everyone else in the class can work on, that would benefit us.

Henscheid's (2008) perspective on the loss of community experienced by college seniors supports this participant's view as these college seniors are being forced into focusing only on their specific academic major. Less than 2 percent of senior programing focuses on areas of growth such as life skills and how to handle transitions outside of the academic major (Henscheid, 2008).

Participants were asked if they felt as though they were prepared to hold a position in their desired field after graduation. Some felt that they could, while many others felt that they did not have the experience necessary to maintain a job within their field. Participants mentioned that they fear that the transition from college to career will be a difficult adjustment. The need for more experience is explained by a participant:

I really don't think so. I think that I need a year to like develop myself more, I think like academically I can do what I know, but I don't think I'm at a point in my life we're I'm ready to like help, because I just want to help people, so I think that I need to do something for myself before I can help them. I think it's just going to be really hard to go from being at Merrimack every day and like expected to work 40 hours a week and remember everything you just retained. Merrimack is such a different breed I feel like, it's going to be such a hard adjustment to leave here in the first place and leave there to be somewhere new.

A couple of participants felt strongly that they are prepared for their desired field. One student explains her confidence by stating: “I feel like my classes are really hands on so being a communications major you need that, so I feel pretty prepared, definitely.” Each student is different in their experiences and what their academic programs provide for them. In this individual’s case she felt ready for her career but may not have the life skills necessary to get herself there.

Programming Based on Student Interest

One of the most prevalent fears mentioned by the participants was their inability to handle real world skills such as finding an apartment, making financial decisions, negotiating, and other important responsibilities (see Appendix C). Some felt that they have had enough experience to maintain these skills but many participants have major financial fears and felt that they are unable to find an apartment, make important life decisions like lease agreements and health insurance, and take on major responsibilities. The participants discussed how they have never been taught these important skills in school and that they rely on their families and friends for support. One participant discussed the serious need for a course or workshop on these skills:

In college we're learning information about our majors but there's no course about that. My parents took like all these different classes and when my mom left she was able to like get an apartment, and do all this stuff with confidence. I feel like we don't have, ...real world fairs to kind of like help us....you're networking for a job but at the same time you need to like find an apartment,... if you want to like go to a grad school cross country you're going to need an apartment, and if you don't know how to do it, I feel like that could really add more stress that should not be needed at all. So I feel like if they had programs here about that...we would be way more confident.

The majority of the participants who shared their concerns have reflected Yeadon’s (2009) notion that undergraduate programs are graduating students without the specific skills necessary to succeed, including skills such as budgeting, choosing insurance, problem solving, time management, etc. Yeadon (2009) explains how without these skills, employers feel as though students will not be able to hold a job. Another participant who has been a commuter

student for the duration of her college career explains how she has learned these skills on her own:

I think personally for me, as a commuter student, I've had to kind of balance the life of being here, but more so being at home and balancing a family life and a home life of having responsibilities there and bills to pay so I think that kind of forced me to learn some of those things quicker and spend some of the time when, say I would have been doing social events more so balancing my time and figuring out those life skills.

The participants were asked if there was a program or experience Merrimack should offer in order to prepare them for this upcoming transition and what sort of topics they feel the program should cover. The majority of the participants recommended a program or experience that covers life skills, which would introduce students to the skills they need for life outside of college, and will allow them the opportunity to ask the professors or panelists' questions regarding life outside of college. Participants feel that the support of campus faculty and staff is needed in this transition, and described it as follows:

I think it would be super ideal to have just as the first year students have a first year experience, for all seniors to have a general senior year experience where everyone's enrolled. I feel like that would be the class every senior would look forward to as far as planning and feeling better about May and in the long run, in terms of higher education it would help the college in terms of retention, ... knowing that the students were prepared and if the end goal of looking at the outcomes of what this class is the outcomes are that students have a plan, whatever that may be. But if they could start in September or in January, starting that plan and then they're forced to start that plan, I think it would be beneficial.

As mentioned earlier, many students felt the need for an introduction to the life skills necessary to become successful beyond college. One participant echoed the previous statement regarding a course or workshop on life skills 101: "Definitely more of like making sure you have good credit, balancing a checkbook, definitely about taxes. Even just dealing with landlords and making sure you're not being screwed over, basically life skills 101."

One participant discussed the idea of starting these support programs earlier and throughout the college experience in order to prepare ahead of time, based on academic major or for the general student population:

I feel like [for] a lot of majors it's required to do some sort of field based or like internship. But I feel like it's not pushed as much until your senior year so maybe like start like Education majors you do your student teaching second semester sophomore year, that's like freshmen year you know that semester you're going to student teach. It would be better I think if we knew like going in freshmen year, like you're going to do a full semester or a full year internship. Like kind of just get it in your head before like.

College students feel a great deal of pressure when it comes time to graduate and make decisions on their own. The pressure to succeed reflects on a student's self-worth and how they motivate themselves (Schwartz, 2012). Every person is different in the ways in which they handle the stress or anxiety of life's transitions. A few of the participants discussed the importance of talking about these concerns with counselors or friends and receiving support from resources on campus. Many participants felt that this is an important time for growth in their lives and that they need supportive outlets, one participant relayed the following:

In terms of campus resources, my supervisor, the director of the O'Brien center has really been like my person that I can go to and share my experiences with and have her give me feedback. I also visited Hamel Health for the first time this past semester to basically talk out all of this pressure I'm getting from all different people who are saying all different things about where I should apply, or where I shouldn't apply. So I went there basically as a neutral zone where I could just vent, they don't know who I am and they don't know what I've done but I could tell them what all of the different interjections I guess I was given and allowed them to help me process what I wanted for me, because I don't take enough time to think about what I actually want. I think that can be anybody's biggest resource in multiple facets.

Pressure, stress, anxiety and fear may be very prevalent in a college senior's transition. These feelings can also occur as students are making plans for life after college. They are often feeling the intense pressure of making the right decision and finding the job that is best for them. One participant discussed the support she received from the campus counseling center:

I feel like if you implement Hamel Health into the retreat that would be really helpful because they push to the point where it's like you're comfortable with yourself and like you just leave feeling way more comfortable with that type of stuff. Just to kind of like go through every little thing and be like am I missing anything, do I feel good about this and like they just make you feel so good about it because they're on your side and that's like a great feeling to have, that they're in your side.

Recommendations from Students

When defining the possible programs or workshops, particularly the senior retreat experience to be implemented at Merrimack College, the participants had many ideas and suggestions that should be incorporated into the planning and development. Some suggestions include: “I think you had some really great ideas where it's not only covering cover letters and business but also implementing yoga and spirituality and I think that would be great. You should definitely do that.” Another student noted that it would be important to clarify what a retreat would look like as many students may not have a clear sense. She said,

When you try to tell people to go on MORE (a current retreat experience at Merrimack College), they're like it's a retreat you're just going to sit there and pray. I don't know I think it's sometimes the way some people were brought up that retreat always means that you're going in a room and locking the doors. The participant also believed that the use of the word retreat took away from the intention of the experience, that many believe that retreats are only about faith. She also made suggestions about the time frame and when the experience would be most effective. She explained her preference by saying, I think saying workshop is better. Also I feel like if you're going to do something like this do it first semester.

In conclusion, students in this study discussed their upcoming career plans, the job search and the pressure to make the right decision as aspects of their senior year experience, and life skills 101, panel discussions, and supportive outlets as things they would like to see in a course or retreat. Recommendations mentioned by the participants will be applied to all plans regarding the Senior Year Experience retreat to be implemented at Merrimack College. The retreat will be created as a holistic experience to allow college seniors to prepare for their upcoming transition mentally, emotionally, and spiritually. The experience is intended to include all students from all backgrounds and is not limited to one religion or spirituality. The experience will be implemented to support Merrimack College seniors and assist them in the areas that they feel are underdeveloped. The students will be provided with the guidance, support, and knowledge to move forward successfully in their upcoming transition as well as throughout life. In the

following section I will describe a plan for a successful retreat that can meet the desired goals of preparing students for senior transition.

Recommendations

- 1) The Office of Campus Ministry at Merrimack College should plan a senior retreat experience that will benefit students in their transition out of college, similar to the existing freshman retreat experience that supports students in making the transition from high school to college life.*

Through my research on the topic of college senior transitional programs, I have discovered many benefits of implementing a senior year experience of some kind at all undergraduate institutions. I focused specifically on existing senior workshops, courses, retreats, and other types of programming. My research was based out of Merrimack College in hope of implementing a program that will support the seniors in their upcoming transition. By speaking with current seniors at the institution, I have found that there are specific areas that students need more support or guidance in order to successfully transition to the next stage of their lives.

Students spoke specifically of their need for life skills 101, in the form of a course, workshop, or a panel question and answer session that can address the skills and resources they may need in order to successfully maintain a full-time job, live on their own, and make important life decisions. They felt that they need and are helped by receiving a lot of support regarding the job search, interview preparation, and resume and cover letter writing from the O'Brien Center for Student Success,. They continue to feel that there are some supportive resources missing. Students also requested guidance on professional dialogue and interview etiquette, as they are very comfortable talking with their peers but felt unsure of how to speak with or address someone professionally. Reflection, support, and counseling are also areas of growth for seniors,

as they felt a great deal of pressure to graduate and make immediate life decisions. Connecting them to resources on campus and providing them the opportunity to discuss their upcoming transition can be very beneficial to their mental health, stress levels, and anxiety.

Many students spoke about their fear of the unknown, and I believe that we are missing the ways in which we can support our students through effective programming, workshops, or curriculum. The students who participated in my study discussed their fear of leaving college behind, and more specifically the relationships they have built over the course of their time at Merrimack. They also mentioned their feeling of an inability to plan ahead, as they are finding it hard to move past what they are facing in the present.

As the Graduate Fellow in the Office of Campus Ministry, my plan is to build upon existing programs in our office in order to strengthen the Merrimack student's experience. We currently offer a retreat experience for incoming freshmen, which is an outlet for students to meet others and form a community at Merrimack College. It is our goal to provide the first year students with the space to ask questions about college and discuss their fears. Based on my research, I feel strongly that the Office of Campus Ministry should also provide a Senior Retreat experience that can support college seniors as they make their transition to the real world (see outline for retreat in Appendix E).

I have worked with my supervisor, Father Keith Hollis, to develop a plan for a senior retreat experience and implement a "pilot" retreat experience for the Fall of 2015. In order to address the various areas mentioned by the participants in my focus group, myself and Father Keith believe that it would be best to collaborate with other offices on campus to develop the holistic experience the students' desire. I have asked the Director of the O'Brien Center for Student Success, as well as the Director of the Hamel Health and Counseling Center on campus

to collaborate with us. I feel confident that we can implement a solid plan for this experience through collaboration. My intention is to leave behind a plan for the next Graduate Fellow and other staff members in my office in hope that they see it through.

Ideally I would like to hold the retreat experience off campus, so the students feel removed from their day to day lives in order to focus solely on their upcoming transition and their plans. I have been working with some retreat and conference venues and will compare dates and cost with my supervisor based on upcoming budgeting and the availability of the venue, along with the other professional staff involved. At this time the collaboration of other offices and the interest of other student affairs professionals on Merrimack's campus is crucial in order to create the holistic experience we are striving for.

The retreat will be open to all Merrimack College seniors, and will be offered in the fall semester of their senior year. When I spoke with the current seniors in my focus group, they suggested that programming regarding their transition should happen earlier in the year, as they feel that they are inundated with programming the second semester of senior year. Due to the program being in its beginning stages, the pilot retreat will begin as an overnight retreat from Friday to Saturday, and will happen once, based on student interest. If there is a large number of students registering for this experience, we will consider planning another experience at some point in the year in order to accommodate all of the students who are interested. My hope is that this program will become an annual event for the Office of Campus Ministry, and all of the other offices involved.

My intention for this holistic retreat experience is for the Merrimack seniors to feel supported and knowledgeable in their transition process and in their upcoming endeavors. I have developed learning outcomes of this experience in order for students, staff, and faculty to better

understand the experience and what will be taught. By attending the senior retreat experience, participants will become aware of the life skills necessary for personal and professional success. Participants will be provided with the opportunity to discuss their questions and concerns with a panel of current professionals in order to shed some light on their upcoming transition.

Participants will also demonstrate their development of professional dialogue and the importance of maintaining professional relationships. Reflection is also a large part of this retreat experience; participants will be given time to reflect on themselves, their plans, and the people or things they will leave behind in this time of transition with the assistance of professional staff, faculty and alumni. Through a great deal of reflection by journaling, counseling, meditation, yoga, or prayer students will prepare themselves mentally and emotionally for life after college.

In the Office of Campus Ministry, we currently conduct 2-3 different retreat experiences over the course of the academic year, such as the Freshmen Retreat, MORE retreat, and other service oriented retreats. In order to receive feedback on each retreat we have participants fill out surveys in assess their overall experience and what they liked and disliked. In order to assess the full experience of this new program, I would recommend surveying all of the participants before they attend the retreat and then once after the retreat experience, as well as the staff members involved. This will allow the Office of Campus Ministry and other offices involved to make any changes or additions to the program for future years, as I hope that this experience will grow and change over time. I feel confident that the senior retreat experience will be a great addition to the current programs and retreat experiences in the Office of Campus Ministry, as well as the Merrimack Community.

2) Merrimack College should consider developing a holistic experience that supports students in the transition from college to the real world. Entry programs such as the First Year

Experience have been required to support students in their adjustment in becoming college students, and an exit program should follow in the student's final year.

Although my research has been applied to one particular office at Merrimack College, I have discovered the many benefits of a senior year experience (SYE) program or course as a way to provide support and closure to the undergraduate students. Merrimack College requires their incoming freshmen to take a First Year Experience (FYE) course in order to prepare students for their college experience. I feel strongly that an SYE program would complement the existing FYE program at Merrimack. In the literature review, I referred many times to Gardner and Van der Veer (1998) in my findings and how their idea of an SYE program focuses on the holistic well-being of the college student. Their primary belief is that with much reflection and focus on life after college alongside academia, the student will be more supported in their transition. (Gardner and Van der Veer, 1998).

By way of example, The University of Connecticut (UCONN) has developed a paired program of FYE and SYE at their institution that has been very successful (see Appendix D). Although UCONN is a public and much larger institution than Merrimack College, the need is just as great. UCONN's program is offered in the form of a course and is worth one credit (UCONN, 2015). Although Merrimack has decided not to award class credit for FYE, yet still consider the program to be mandatory, it seems as though it would only make sense to include a culminating program for seniors. Programs such as SYE allow students the ability to gain the important skills and resources that many employers feel recent college graduates are lacking (Yeadon, 2009). Skills such as time management, written and verbal communication, problem solving, decision making, as well as major life skills such as budgeting, choosing insurance, and finding an apartment are all skills students need. The course also provides them with a sense of

community and the resources within that community to help them transition out of college (Henscheid, 2008).

I believe that a major consideration, and possibly obstacle, in order for Merrimack to provide an SYE program is budgeting. In order to begin a program such as this we must consider staffing and the resources needed to make the program successful. In an ideal situation, I recommend that the SYE program be a full semester, preferably in the fall of the student's senior year in order to provide them the time to think about their transition sooner and develop plans for post-graduation. It can be modeled after the existing FYE experience at Merrimack and taught by both student affairs professionals and faculty members. The course should be lecture and discussion based and provide several learning outcomes such as the opportunity to practice and apply the skills learned from the course, the use of reflection in order to develop a plan for life after college, and the ability to develop a stronger sense of direction for life after college. I recommend that the course be piloted first and start as a workshop series to support seniors throughout their final year of college.

Just like the retreat experience, assessment through surveys, or focus groups will be very beneficial to the development of this program in order to determine the student's' needs and the effectiveness of the program. I also recommend an incentive for students to make this program a priority. For those of us who work with college students, we know that it is very hard to get students to attend any type of programming or event without giving them a reason why they should. It is imperative that in order for the course to be effective and worthwhile, students should receive credit for the course. This can be determined once the FYE course is assessed after this coming year, but from my research and in speaking with students in my focus group, students need a true incentive. This could be course credit, free items to help them in their job

search such as a portfolio or a business card holder, or VIP status at a campus event in order to make this experience a priority.

I feel that based upon my research and the conversations I have had within my focus group that there is a strong need for some form of a senior transition program at Merrimack College. There are many different ways in which an institution can incorporate such programs into their curriculum aside from the two that I have selected for Merrimack. Based on Merrimack's values and beliefs, I feel that a retreat experience and/or an SYE program would allow our institution to grow and develop when it comes to building a community and meeting the needs of our students. With some creativity and determination, I am confident that Merrimack College can provide the programs and resources necessary in order to support our seniors in their transition from college to the real world.

3) The Hamel Health and Wellness Center should consider offering specific mental health initiatives and counseling for graduating Merrimack College Seniors.

In my research I discovered studies on transition and how transition affects the college senior. Many students feel a great deal of pressure to have a plan and get a job right out of college and we know that this does not always happen right away. Often times students take some time off, work part-time in order to pay their bills, or do not find a job for months after graduation. Due to this pressure students become anxious or depressed. Wood (2004) refers to this as "postparchment depression," which develops due to the overwhelming amount of stress and anxiety of transitioning from college to the real world. This form of depression may not develop until after graduation but it is in Merrimack's best interest to support these students in any way possible.

After speaking with the students who participated in my focus groups, I found that mental health, especially during their senior year, is a major concern. Not every participant would mention it for themselves, but for those who did, the realization and the desire for support was overwhelmingly strong. Two participants spoke about their experience receiving counseling at Hamel Health and how beneficial it has been to them. Many participants agreed that it would be very helpful to talk about their transition, how they are feeling, and their decision making process. Students mentioned that they are often being told what they should or could do, and that there are not many outlets for students to process these decisions.

I understand that there for some students and communities, there is a stigma behind seeking mental health services and that it can be extremely difficult for students to seek support, so I recommend group events or open office hours for students to attend throughout the course of their senior year. Those who participated in my focus groups seemed especially interested in self-care initiatives. If Hamel Health can begin a dialogue within Merrimack's community and begin programming on how they can help themselves and one another, I feel that students will begin to consider those practices within their daily or weekly routines. Students were very receptive to the ideas of yoga and meditation, free massages on campus, stress reduction programs, etc.

I feel that these initiatives will get students to start thinking about their mental health and wellness and can be great outlets to advertise the available resources on campus. It would also be beneficial to have counselors attend the events as an option to receive counseling or support after attending the program. There are many ways to speak about mental health support resources and hopefully the programs that began this year on Merrimack's campus will continue to survive and thrive. Based on the perspectives of students in this study, I feel strongly that college seniors

would be very receptive to mental health initiatives, especially if there are programs geared specifically towards them and their upcoming transition.

Conclusion

College is the time for students to learn, develop, and grow into the people they have become. Senior year is an especially significant time for college students, as they are in the process of making important decisions regarding their futures. Through my research I have discovered the need for transitional programs or Senior Year Experience workshops or courses. Through my personal experience and what I have discovered, I believe that college students are not provided with the tools and resources necessary to succeed in life after college. I found that institutions were focusing solely on the academic portion of the college student's experience and not enough on their holistic well-being.

As educators, administrators, and leaders it is our responsibility to facilitate these meaningful changes, and what many may deem as necessary programs. We must not lose focus of the goal at hand. Although there are many colleges and universities that implement transitional programs on both ends of the college journey, there is still much progress to be made. A transition is not easily made without lessons learned and the support to pull through. As leaders in higher education it is extremely important that we focus on the student as a whole, the skills they acquire, their emotional and spiritual needs, and how they understand their role through academia. One person's life is filled with many transitions, and nothing is more valuable than providing students with the knowledge, resources, support, and confidence necessary for success in their immediate and distant futures.

After holding two focus groups with current seniors at Merrimack College, I found all of my research to be relatable to the issue of planning an SYE experience, however there was more that the students shared with me that my research did not provide. The participants spoke a great deal about the need for a life skills 101 course, workshop, or question and answer panel. They

feel that they have not been provided with the knowledge it takes to survive in the “real world” post-graduation. The participants also spoke of how they felt that they could use some more support in regards to self-care and counseling, that they felt a great deal of pressure to make the right decision for their future directly out of college. Participants also discussed how they wished they would learn everything they need to know to succeed throughout the course of their college experience, as they feel inundated with programs in their final semester of their senior year.

Through deep consideration of the research and the participants’ requests, I have been intentional of how Merrimack College could support their seniors in their upcoming transition. I have designed a senior retreat experience that will be implemented by the Office of Campus Ministry, in collaboration with the Hamel Health and Wellness Center and the O’Brien Center for Student Success. The retreat has been developed as a holistic experience that will support seniors in preparation for life after college, as well as mentally, spiritually, and emotionally for their upcoming transition.

I also recommend that Merrimack College consider creating a matching course to their FYE course program by developing a SYE course to educate and support their students on life after college. It has been made very clear through my research and results that college seniors are not prepared for their transition, and the skills necessary to be successful in a career and in society. I ask that Merrimack College and other institutions consider their students’ needs and add a holistic transitional experience to their curriculum. It is on higher education to shape these young minds and support them to survive and thrive, not just in their professions, but in life. Transitional programs are the answer to the future of higher education in order to support the success of college graduates, because if not now, when?

Appendix A

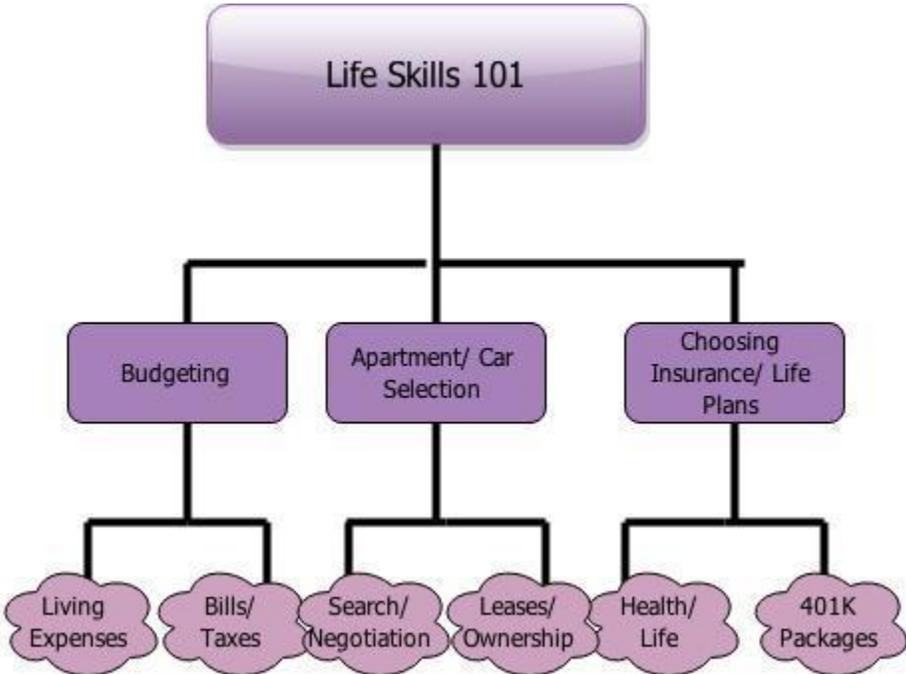
Protocol for Focus Group

- 1) How is your Senior Year going?
- 2) How many of you have been to the Career Center on campus? If you have what did you go there for?
- 3) What is the current state of your plans in terms of career direction? Do you have a plan for after graduation?
- 4) Do you feel you are prepared for the job search and interview process?
- 5) Do you feel you are capable of holding a position in your desired field after graduation?
- 6) Do you feel prepared to undertake typical post-graduation activities, such as finding an apartment, opening a checking and savings account, and obtaining a car?
- 7) Is there a program or event you wish Merrimack offered in order to prepare you for life after college? What would such a program cover?
- 8) What part of your upcoming transition are you most nervous or unsure about?
- 9) If Merrimack were to develop a senior year experience course or workshop series, what sort of topics would you be interested in seeing? (ex. Yoga, meditation, life skills workshops, midnight mass, etc.)
- 10) Are you emotionally and spiritually prepared to move on from college? (Fearful of leaving anything behind?)
- 11) What resources or programs might help in moving on from college emotionally? Thinking back to a transitional period in your life, what or who helped you through this process? (Did you rely on faith, relationships, a hobby, etc.)
- 12) Is there anything about the senior year transition I have not asked you?

Appendix B

Focus Group 1		
Participant Pseudonym	Academic Major	Minor
Sydney	Human Development	Education
Kyle	Electrical Engineering	Math
Pete	Human Development	
Gary	English	History and Education
Kristy	Communication Studies	Public and Professional Writing
Tiffany	Psychology	Interpersonal Communication
Focus Group 2		
Participant Pseudonym	Academic Major	
Sam	Political Science	
John	Accounting	
Jacqueline	Human Development	
Mya	Health Science	
Mason	Psychology	

Appendix C



Appendix D

University of Connecticut SYE Course Information

UConn Senior Year Experience. (n.d.). Retrieved August 12, 2014, from

<http://seniors.uconn.edu/senior-year-experience-sye.html>

Detailed Course Information

Course Name: UNIV 4800 – Senior Year Experience

Course Number: The course number varies depending on the small-group discussion section. Once you register for a discussion section, the lecture portion of the course (section 001) will automatically be added to your schedule. Most sections are open enrollment and do not require a permission number.

Discussion Sections: In addition to the lecture, each student will enroll in a 15-person discussion section. Discussion sections provide an opportunity to practice skills discussed in lecture, speak with other seniors about transitioning from college, reflect on your experience at UConn, and develop a stronger sense of direction for life after graduation.

Required Work: Enrolled students are expected to attend lecture and to actively participate in discussion sections. In addition to the lectures and discussions, students will complete a number of assignments throughout the semester.

Lecture Topics

Every Monday for lecture we invite professionals from the community and university to discuss topics relevant to seniors.

Topics may include:

- Graduation Preparation
- Resume and Cover Letter Writing
- Basic Money Management
- Buying A Car
- Interview and Job Preparation
- Insurance 101
- Job Searching
- The World of Work and Graduate School
- Staying Connected to UConn

Appendix E

Outline of Retreat Workshops/Sessions or Talks

Life Skills 101

- Q& A Session Panel
- Professional dialogue/ Interview etiquette

Counseling and Reflection

- Transitions
- Leaving college behind
- Relationships
- Moving forward

Resources for Stress/ Depression/ Transition

- Meditation
- Yoga
- Prayer

Planning ahead

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