

Coping With the Final Year: Helping Seniors Manage the Mixed Emotions of Transitioning Out of Undergraduate School

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Introduction

- In higher education today, students experience several transitions over the course of their college careers
- A great deal of attention is given to freshmen as they transition from high school to college
- Comparatively, little attention has been given to seniors, as they transition from undergraduate school to their next phase of life (Gardener, 1998; Overton-Healy, 2010)

“Seniors’ concerns are complex.; they transcend simply finding a job... Seniors themselves sense a very dense and thick transition, multi-layered, and heavy with implications which can affect their adult lives. The final year goes well beyond meeting academic requirements and writing a resume; it becomes a re-imagining of self, identity, and purpose” (Overton-Healy, 2010)

Outline for the Presentation

- The senior year of college
- Seniors' feelings and perceptions
- Schlossberg Transition Theory
- Change in identity
- Self-sabotage & stagnation
- Change in relationship dynamics
- Support from academic advisors
- Activity & Discussion
- Seniors making meaning of their undergraduate education
- Senior Year Experience (SYE)
- Additional SYE initiatives

The Senior Year of College

- Senior year is the culmination of three or four years of hard work
- Seniors experience feelings of excitement, pride, and anticipation
- Simultaneously, seniors experience feelings of anxiety, doubt, and grief
- As a result, seniors experience a combination of mixed emotions that occur throughout their final year of college

Seniors' Perceptions and Emotions

- Saginak (1998) identified five issues that many seniors face:
 - Role change
 - Practical considerations (finishing coursework, applying for degree conferral, etc.)
 - Time demands
 - Pressure to create an action plan for after college
 - Assessing their own educational experience

Schlossberg Transition Theory

- **Transition:** An event, or non-event, that has an impact on roles, routines, relationships, or perceptions
- A transition is only a transition if it is defined as such by the person experiencing it
 - Changes may occur in a person's life, but it may not have much of an impact on the person
- Transitions consist of *type*, *context*, and *impact*

Schlossberg Transition Theory (continued)

1) **Situation –**

- Trigger, Timing, Control, Role management, Duration, Previous experiences with a similar transition, Concurrent stress, and Assessment
- **Transitioning from undergraduate school to the next phase of life**

2) **Self –**

- Personal and demographic characteristics
 - Affects how a person views their life
- Psychological resources
 - Coping (Self perception, values, ego development, etc.)
- **Changing their identity from undergraduate student to graduate student, full-time employee, etc.**

3) **Support –**

- Social context (family units, network of friends, intimate relationships, institutions and communities)
- **Losing the support systems what were developed in college (advisors, faculty members, mentors, friends, etc.)**

4) **Strategies –**

- Modify the situation
- Control the meaning of the problem
- Help to manage stress afterward
- *People most successful at coping use multiple coping mechanisms*
- **Identifying programs, initiatives, and interventions to make the transition as seamless as possible, while helping seniors to make meaning of their undergraduate education**

Change in Identity

- No longer having the identity as a student may be difficult for many students
- For many seniors, attaining high grades and achieving academically was intrinsic to their self-esteem and self-concept
- The concept of creating a new identity outside of the university elicits feelings of anxiety and uncertainty

Self-Sabotage and Stagnation

- The senior year of college can be so overwhelming, many students experience “crisis of imagination” (Wood, 2004)
- Very often, seniors who have multiple options for after graduation have difficulty choosing one option, so therefore “shut down”
- Seniors may sabotage their own graduation due to the fear of leaving the university

Change in Relationship Dynamics

- Seniors may choose to end romantic relationships after graduation
- Seniors may question how to build and maintain healthy, adult romantic relationships
- Seniors may also question how to build and maintain adult friendships
- The dynamics of the relationships with parents and family may change, which elicit feelings of anxiety

How Academic Advisors Can Support Senior Advisees

- Seniors need much more attention and guidance than they may seem
- Setting mandatory advising meetings during last year will help them to feel encouraged
- Very often, seniors just need to “vent”
- Creating comparison charts of the differences/similarities from undergraduate school to their next phase can help them to process the transition
- Emailing constant reminders about filing degree conferrals, applying for graduation, etc. will help

“Seniors” Activity

- Please fill out the “Seniors” activity worksheet individually (5 minutes)
- After completing the worksheet individually, please partner with a neighbor to discuss your responses (5 minutes)
- Finally, we will come back together for a large-group discussion (10 minutes)

Discussion

- 1) What have your advising experiences with senior college students been?
- 2) When working with seniors, what have their transition from undergraduate school to their next phase look like? Did they exhibit mixed emotions about leaving undergraduate school?
- 3) What have been some of the best practices, strategies, or initiatives that you have used to help seniors successfully transition from undergraduate school to their next phase?

Seniors Making Meaning of their Undergraduate Education

- It is imperative that seniors be given the opportunity to make meaning of their undergraduate experience (Gardner, 1999)
- Seniors may greatly benefit from the opportunity to relate their undergraduate experience to their long-term goals
- Since many seniors are at the stage where they are re-evaluating their purpose, helping students to see how their degree added value to their lives is imperative
 - Helping seniors to see that they weren't just wasting their time
- Seniors often need guidance as they prepare for the transition from undergraduate school to graduate school, work force, or gap-year program.

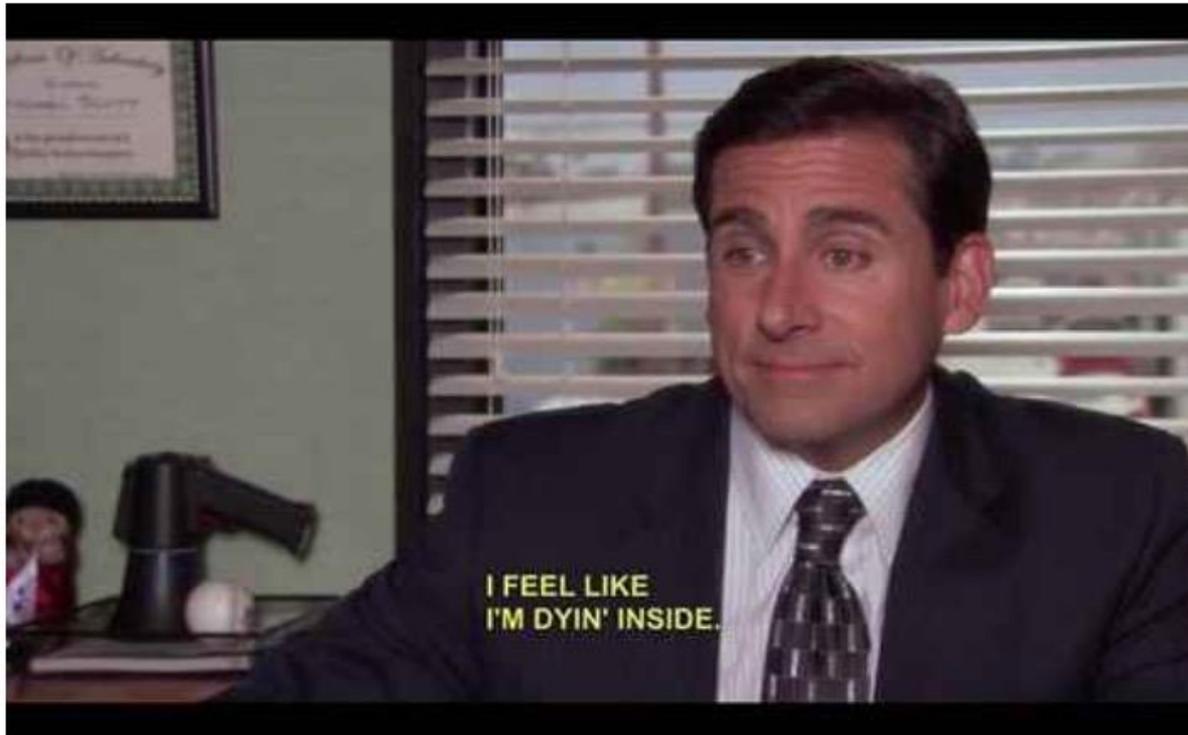
Senior Year Experience (SYE)

- Senior Year Experience (Gardner, 1998)
 - “...a variety of initiatives in the academic and co-curricular domains that serve to promote and enhance greater learning and satisfaction and a more successful transition for the college student in their final quarter of their baccalaureate experience” (p. 12)
- Give seniors the chance to conduct self-assessments (similar to freshman year)
- Give seniors the opportunity to demonstrate what they have learned as undergraduates

Additional SYE Initiatives

- Senior Small Group discussions
- Graduate school preparation
- Senior Capstone courses
- Gap-year programs
 - Peace Corp
 - Teach for America
- Workshops
 - Transitioning
 - Coping mechanisms
 - Building and maintaining adult relationships
 - Real life responsibilities (finding an apartment, paying utilities, etc.)
- Collaborating with Counseling Services to offer ways of remaining positive and centered while going through this transition

13. When it's the night before graduation and you look at your friends and realize you're all about to go your separate ways



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(www.buzzfeed.com)

Thank You for attending our session!! 😊