



12-19-2013

Senioritis -- or an Opportunity for Growth?

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Recommended Citation

Desautels, Lori, "Senioritis -- or an Opportunity for Growth?" (2013). *Scholarship and Professional Work – Education*. 117.
http://digitalcommons.butler.edu/coe_papers/117

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Senioritis -- or an Opportunity for Growth?

 www.edutopia.org/blog/senioritis-or-opportunity-for-growth-lori-desautels

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Walking into the kitchen, she spots the community college acceptance letter on top of a stack of mail. Early in December, the Marine Corps notifies him that basic training starts in six months. She's dreamed about attending her mom's alma mater for the last few years, and admissions has responded positively. The auto shop where he's had an afterschool job since junior year has just promised full-time employment beginning two weeks after graduation.

Now what?

This question concerns me as an educator of K-12 and higher education.





The Genius in All of Us

Whether talking with seniors and staff at public high schools or greeting undergraduates in my college courses, the response is always the same: "Yes, Dr. Lori, the last part of my senior year was a waste! It didn't matter what or how I did. Even if the colleges told me I had to keep up my grades, they rarely check!" Year after year in many public high schools, seniors in their second semester subconsciously take four months off, becoming increasingly bored, restless and unproductive. Research reports that during this period, the U.S. has the highest dropout rate of any country -- almost 40 percent. This is a national crisis.

And yet, at the district and school levels, there *is* something we can do to change the trajectory of this listless, apathetic and stressful period that plagues many adolescents preparing for one of the most monumental independent shifts in their lives. The change calls for collaboration and engagement. I cannot imagine anything more significant than equipping our young adults with knowledge of their strengths, passions, abilities and the opportunity to experience and discuss this world of future learning before it becomes a reality!

In these late adolescent years, the brain's frontal lobe is still developing based on the experiences and environment provided. This is where the sub skills of decision making, problem solving, empathy, emotional check-ins, planning and organizing are unfolding. It is imperative that educators, parents and community become aware of the high need for experiences that stimulate learning connections in the senior year of high school.

According to research by David Shenk, lecturer, filmmaker and author, we are living in a time when adaptive behaviors are critically important for success. Yes, we need the rigor of math, linguistics, science and technology, but we also desperately need to recognize and tap the creative genius of every student. In David's most recent book, [The Genius in All of Us](#), he writes, "Limitations in achievement are not due to inadequate genetic assets, but in our

ability to tap into what we already have." What does this mean for educators and students?

We now know that the environment we create and the classroom opportunities we provide are integrated and interact with the thousands of genes to produce dynamic strengths and expressions of multiple intelligences. Children develop only as their environment demands development.

Asking the Right Questions

So how do we rejuvenate passion, uncover student strengths and, most important, create a service curriculum reaching out to the community and touching our students' minds and hearts in this time of great brain growth? We begin by asking students the questions that drive them to self-reflect while listening to their own passions, strengths and interests. As educators and parents, we have the ability of integrating these questions inside everyday classes and home environments:

- If I had all day to spend on one project or activity, what would that be?
- What activity or skill has always intrigued me and would I want to know more about?
- If I could choose three of my classes for next year on any topic, what would they be and why?
- If money didn't matter and I could design my own career, what would that look like?
- If I could design the perfect school day, what would that be?

What if we begin annually assessing strengths, passions and interests during freshman or sophomore year using surveys, rating scales and anecdotal notes? What if we incorporate and track these assessments just as we do with end-of-course assessments and AP tests, recording and revisiting this data each semester? What if we began grouping students according to their interests and passions, meeting three times a year in **student-led collaborations** where second-semester professional learning plans begin to develop?

What if these professional learning plans called upon the community, bringing in guest speakers from civic organizations, businesses, vocational schools and various institutes? What could we learn and apply from listening to the abbreviated seminars with time set aside for questions and discussion two days a week? What if students learned to deeply research their topics of interest, integrating Common Core ELA and math standards, embedding the history and needs of the organizations and businesses, and finding ways to propagate outcomes and production as part of their portfolio? This could become meaningful learning in these adolescent years for students driven by a personal sense of autonomy, purpose and mastery.

What if students took their ideas, studies and questions into various field experiences eight to ten hours a week during the school day, collaborating with these organizations in designing novel ways of service?

What if each student created a professional learning plan of studies and experiences with three actionable ways to improve and build upon those individual field experiences? These professional learning plans would be shared and reviewed by school boards, parents, and the actual business or organization where the student was mentored. What if students acquired hours of experience *plus* college or trade school credit, scholarships and recognition not only for their project outcomes, but for their effort, their oral and written presentations, and the practical application of their ideas?

Resources for an Action Plan

Below is a sample list of community organizations and specializations that call for a preparedness of "synthesizing ideas," generating a compassionate presence of service while strengthening the passions and interests -- and the innate genius of every student.

What service organizations and topics for professional learning plans can you suggest to engage our students as

they battle senioritis?