Introduction

America’s high school seniors are in such trouble that a national commission was created to analyze the problems inherent in the senior year and come up with solutions. I welcome their work—I served on the commission—but having been a high school teacher for twenty-five years, I don’t need outsiders to tell me something is amiss. The experience of being a senior has grown more and more confusing and, for too many, meaningless. Senior year is seen as a kind of holding tank, a way station on the road to somewhere else. That “somewhere else,” the object of so much of the seniors’ focus, takes on enormous, even disproportionate, importance in the seniors’ minds. However, though the seniors’ minds are elsewhere, their bodies are still in high school, and work must be found for them to do there.

The institutions that ought to support the seniors—high schools, colleges, the workplace—seem isolated from one another. High schools charge ahead with the same old schedule and the same old program, seemingly uninterested in the number of new challenges that have been added to the seniors’ lives, only marginally willing to help them cope. More and more colleges are admitting students on the basis of tests taken and grades earned during the junior year; the senior year is thus no longer a period when important accomplishments and growth are expected. Workplaces are notorious for being uninterested in high school transcripts, attendance records, or the work that was done there.

The result is emotional chaos, which seniors try to simplify by calling it stress. There is too much to do; seniors are living at least two lives at once, and in neither can they do as well as they would like. Should I finish this paper or check out the website of that college? Should I master this skill needed for a job in the local factory or that skill needed to pass chemistry? Can I do both? Neither? Maybe I’ll just go out with my friends and clear my head.
Academic rigor is defined in new ways in the final year of high school. Seniors face “ultimate tracking” as they prepare themselves to operate effectively in a wide variety of environments. Some students cripple themselves on the hurdles, while others slip serenely under the bar. And as they do, they watch one another—disapprovingly. After years together, they are preparing for the big breakup. Expectations are so broad and competition so fierce that there is little time to reflect on and manage the experience. As a result, a senior year is often handled unwisely—and is more unhappy than most seniors feel able to admit.

For years, while I was teaching them, I blamed individual seniors for hysteria or laziness or for not being able to resist the cynicism and manipulation that crept into so many of their attitudes. Getting away from the classroom, I have been able to see more clearly that for teachers and students alike, senior year is a cultural and political challenge at least as much as it is a personal one. And that's good news, because it means there are concrete steps we can take.

What's Being a Senior Really Like?

Step one is to understand what the senior year really is in the mind of someone who is going through it. Being a senior is a pervasive American cultural experience, ranking up there with being married, having children, holding a job, attending church, and going to baseball games. Between 80 and 90 percent of our teenagers finish high school. They build up expectations for their senior year, live through it self-consciously, and remember it clearly for years. These are—or are meant to be—their “glory days.” More young women may wear a prom dress than a wedding dress. High school graduation is a milestone.

Senior years everywhere have strikingly common features. Despite tremendous differences among schools, the experience of going to and then leaving high school is a unifying one. One will be part of “the class of 2005” whether one is rich or poor, northerner or southerner, boy or girl, black or white. The spotlight shown on seniors captures the imagination of far more people than just the seniors and their parents and teachers. The experience is full of fascination and mythology for us all.
The way the year is spent—or misspent—is significant. Other nations have high schools, and their young people experience many of the same transitions and rituals. But in most other nations, seniors expect to take an important exam at the end of the year. Their future depends on how well they do on it: they will not have time to be school politicians, varsity athletes, and homecoming queens. In the United States, for a variety of good and bad reasons, the senior year is perceived to be not as rigorously academic as the earlier high school years. It is both a kind of apogee and moratorium at once, and our young people turn their prodigious energy toward other things. “Being a senior” is far more important than any specific piece of schoolwork a senior might do or any specific qualification a senior might earn. Status outweighs performance, at least academic performance.

And ceremony outweighs achievement. The pomp and circumstance of the typical American graduation ceremony has taken on a meaning of its own. The function of high school may have been forgotten or even spurned months before. But for seniors, the form—participation in a joyous and proud ceremony—still carries a lot of clout. Underneath all the posturing lies the conviction that they will be different people once they have walked across that auditorium stage. Since the prospect both delights and terrifies them, it absorbs a great deal of energy.

The Senior’s Cultural Imperatives

When faced with personal challenges like this one, we often turn to culture for guidance. But what is culture? Anna Quindlen, in One True Thing, writes, “Everyone makes up their little stories and then they wonder why their own lives aren’t like that” (1998). I think of culture as those “little stories,” those voices in our head that tell us what is good and bad, beautiful and ugly, natural and unnatural.

When we older folk meet a senior in high school, few of us can resist telling an anecdote from our own senior year. Some of these memories dwell on our triumphs and some on our troubles, but all reinforce the idea that it was a vibrant and crucial time, one dominated by bonding and ritual. And even if our stories begin with an acknowledgment of how scared we were, they usually end with the message that a newfound energy and maturity were somehow
found to deal with tremendous new challenges. The math course was passed. The application was filled out. The winning point was made. The prom was well organized. The yearbook came out on time. The emphasis here is on “somehow.” In our memories, the transformation was magical. It could happen to these seniors too. Hence the assumptions that surround the experience of the senior year.

Seniors in high school have dozens of these “little stories,” these insistent voices, in and outside their head, telling them what, as seniors, they will be like, what they must do, even what they will feel like. It is a year filled with cultural imperatives. Talking with seniors, I heard so many “supposed to’s,” so many “should’s,” so many “since I am a senior’s,” it seemed as if all the seniors in the country had been handed the same piece of music and were distinguished from one another only in the way they chose to sing. Nearly every senior agreed with at least a few of these cultural imperatives:

- Transition dominates the senior year. It is present in what the students do, what they think about, how they relate to adults and to one another, what they think of themselves. And transition is harder work than many of us remember.
- Senior year is meant to be a rite of passage between childhood and adulthood. A young woman I spoke with had been bringing her mother home from bars since she was nine, but she did not feel she would really be considered an adult until she graduated from high school. Another senior, a young man, said, “I’m not just leaving high school; I’m leaving the first eighteen years of my life. It’s kind of a morbid thought, but you almost want to have all your affairs in order before you move on.”
- Seniors have a daunting job to do: leave a less selective, less expensive institution that has in most cases become very familiar and strike out in a new direction. “You want to take as much of the intensity as you can, before you need to start all
over again. It’s your best year, because after that you have to go through life.”

■ Seniors expect to be honored as leaders. They will be—and belong—in the spotlight. “Seniors,” one of them stated, half-shy, half-boasting, “are the hottest of hot stuff. I can express myself as a senior. I’m admired more. My voice can be heard with more emphasis.” Another felt that experiencing senior year was like being the bride at a wedding: “Everyone wants to be you, not literally, of course, but that’s what they aspire to.” “Senior year,” one student confided, “you’re up there. You’re the tallest. You’re the high ones in the school, the ones in the front, in the middle of the pictures. You’re supposed to be at the peak of your form, in school and in sports”; as the oldest students in the school, they are “coteachers, almost.” Theirs are the days of being prom queen—or at least, as one young woman put it (poignantly, since she was not), “in the running for prom queen.” This is the year to catch the touchdown pass.

■ “Your senior year is the last chance to enjoy the only real friendships you’ll ever have.” Though the seniors have no direct evidence, they have been told this so often they believe it. Friends are not only to enjoy, however. Senior year, they are convinced, is when these friendships need to be cemented, “so that you will always have them.”

■ The glorious nature of senior year will trump personal attributes and personal circumstances. “The high school years are the best in your life, and senior year is the best year in high school,” said a young woman in a large and dreary high school, in between a litany of specific complaints. Another senior, mired in extraordinary family problems, nevertheless asserted, “I’m a senior. I’m at the top now. This is going to be the pinnacle and it’s supposed to be the finest year of my life.” Later, changes will be catalogued. Later, issues of power, responsibility, reputation, may be analyzed in terms of what they meant about a person’s life. Each individual story can be weighed and measured. But first, there is the simple issue of status, and the change in status happens to every senior.
Life for seniors ought to be easy—at least in school. “Senior year is like a payoff for all the hard work you did in your first three years.” One student told me that he had first heard that senior year would be “your party year” when he was in sixth grade. “It sounded like a great idea,” even to an eleven-year-old, “but then I didn’t turn out to be much of a partier.”

Seniors live in three time dimensions at once. They are reaping the rewards—or bitter fruits—of the past; they are living in a complicated, stressful (“hyperefficient or maybe just hyper”) present; and they are “creating memories for the future,” so that some day they can be as nostalgic as Bruce Springsteen (who wrote “Glory Days” well after his senior year in high school) and their parents and their parents’ friends. Living in the present while planning for the future can test the mettle of even the oldest and wisest of us.

Great changes are anticipated. “I can remember the day the old seniors left and we all had a celebration. We kept saying, ‘I can’t believe I’m going to be a senior!’ Essentially it was as if we were a different person.” It is a year full of snapshots, but it is still a whole year long. It is a year when “the weeks go by so fast, but the hours go by so slowly.” Seniors need money, although they won’t have the time to earn it if they are to do everything else well. They also need to sleep enough, eat right, help around the house, be nice to the neighbors, just as if they were not living through the most eventful and crucial year of their lives.

All these achievements, all these transitions, are meant to be, or at least to look, effortless. That’s what the culture demands—being “cool.” Seniors’ and their families’ dreams are exposed for all to see. But they mustn’t look nervous. They need to be considered ready for the next step. They need to achieve but make it all look easy. They need to be beautiful but without make-up. They need to stay idealistic yet take part in a college admissions and job procurement process that is, in some respects, dishonest and unjust. They need to deal—really deal—with the issue of money and how much of it they have or haven’t got. They need to be hopeful but not arrogant, proud but not entitled.
The Down Side of Expectations

Expectations are the baggage on the senior train: necessary but also burdensome. So many of the students I listened to seemed calm, hopeful, sure that they had “earned” their status. But in every case, there were also pockets of almost desperate darkness. “I expected a lot. Nobody really said anything about the pressures that would come with it.” Senior year, they said, was “supposed to be perfect.”

Perfect? For whom? These cultural imperatives are not only numerous and extravagant but also at cross-purposes with one another. Looking “cool” is not the same as taking “down time,” and looking like an achiever sometimes gets in the way of being one. Too many seniors are warped and defeated by the sheer bulk of these “little stories,” so that they end up wondering “why their own lives aren’t like that.” “This is fantasy-to-reality year,” one of them told me in midwinter, and for him the “reality” had already been painful.

Several students I talked with described senior year as “a year full of compromises.” No matter how hard they might try not to show it, they all had one or another deep disappointment. One “model student” in Michigan slid easily into a number of colleges, hardly breaking a sweat, but then found that she had a terrible time making the decision of where to go. She had followed directions beautifully, but would she be able to act on her own? What had high school taught her, anyway? A young Texan had caught that touchdown pass and been wonderfully celebrated by the newspapers, his school, and his family, only to find that without better work in math he might not graduate.

Senior year is nearly as hard on parents and teachers as it is on the seniors. Much of the emotional turmoil in seniors and in the people who work with them is understandable. There is no point in grieving unduly about the natural process of growing up. We adults must be honest, however, about our own challenge: the next phase of life for people we have come to treasure will have to be somewhere else. Indeed, their departure has already begun. There are many other dynamics in the senior year, but the central pair are these: the students are facing considerable change, and the people in their lives who would normally help them cope are facing considerable change themselves.
Shifting Into Neutral

Step two is to identify and understand the aspects of high school that have taken an undesirable form, almost without our noticing. “Senior year,” I was told again and again, “is blow-off time.” For many students, the work is not meaningful. Most believe that because they have collected the bulk of the credits they need for graduation by the time they end junior year, senior year is not designed for academic growth. They have “permission to coast.” This is true even in schools where the seniors’ skills are inadequate for a good job or the entry-level courses in the local college. A certain amount of treading water will be tolerated.

How can that be?

Progress through high school has become almost automatic, which puts less emphasis on the careful demonstration of increasing proficiency in necessary skills and increasing sophistication about important content. Students may know how many credits they still lack, but they do not know how much they know and are able to do in order to perform well, in whatever arena, after high school. They know they passed algebra in the ninth grade; they don’t know how much they still remember or whether it might be needed in a job or whether they will be able to use what they know—and learn more—once they are elsewhere. The same uncertainty exists regarding reading and writing. Even though they are tested constantly, the format of the tests—rushed, high-stakes, external, standardized, crammed into a room with a lot of other nervous people—makes them doubt the results. They don’t know whether they will be able to do the close reading that will matter to them. Without knowing what they still need to learn, they carry around a lot of subliminal nervousness, but they are not sufficiently alert to the dangers of a year of “coasting.”

Sensing no real emergency in a failure to make much academic progress, the seniors put their energy into the transition and to making whatever progress they have made look as impressive as possible. They also attend to the many other cultural imperatives related to senior year, many of which require a lot of time. As a result, the academic purposes of high school are further shortchanged. Since students and teachers relate mostly on that academic dimension, their relationships suffer.
Too many seniors limp away from high school, ashamed of their last few months there, no longer as respected by themselves, their peers, and their teachers as they were just months earlier. Too many parents and teachers are angry as well as hurt as they watch them go. Parents may have a chance to repair these frayed relationships. But many teachers do not, and it affects the way they feel about their work. Perhaps a wealthy nation can afford to give a year of “re­tirement” to its eighteen-year-olds, can let the prom replace intellectual development as the focus of school. Perhaps—or perhaps not.

Not With a Bang But a Whimper

In most cases, senior year does not live up to the hopes that the seniors, their families, and their teachers have for it. It is a year in which confusion, dishonesty, fear, risk taking, cynicism, and malingering have come to play too large a part. Not every student succumbs to behavior like this, of course. But for too many of them, the culture seems to be there, ready to pounce. “She tried to keep her balance,” one senior said, describing her older sister’s senior year. “But in the end, she slipped down.” It was a struggle she too was about to undertake and which she feared, because she already sensed that she would lose it.

Seniors are dealing with more than just a sense of foreboding. They have a disease named after them: senioritis. A student in Michigan described it this way: “I have a friend who’s gotten A’s and B’s her whole life. And ever since spring break she’s not there any more. She just doesn’t—it’s just not easy for her to do what she has to do any more.”

There are many reasons the seniors seem to fade away. Many, in fact, lose their ability to fully engage in their work long before spring break. Some reasons are more general, as in the case of the student who had heard for years that during senior year, he “wouldn’t have to work”—essentially, that he would get something for nothing. He never seemed to doubt that “right.” Other reasons are more specific. Unreasonable time demands in junior year and in the fall of senior year inevitably...
lead even the “best” seniors first to taking efficiency measures, then to cutting corners. Juggling a number of deadlines leads to procrastination and in time to simply not meeting one or more of them.

Finally, there is the widespread feeling that once the last high school grades have been sent to the college or the job, there is no longer any need to do one’s best. Learning has not been for a larger goal but “just to get the grades.” Once the grades do not matter, schoolwork doesn’t matter. This is the cultural expectation that most clearly devalues the high school, yet it is overwhelmingly endorsed by seniors and even many of their parents; even some teachers reluctantly accept it as if it were as inevitable as the tide. “I’m definitely not typical, because I’m still working,” one senior admitted, somewhat apologetically. Resisting her classmates’ posture of edgy, even belligerent lassitude took real energy on her part, energy that might have been used elsewhere. And she was ostracized.

By spring term, most seniors declare that they are “worn out.” The 70 percent who are still expecting to go to college are tired of “playing the game.” The endless conversations about who got accepted where, the primacy of standardized testing, the way they pumped up their credentials in order to compete, have all undermined their most honest picture of themselves, the one they confront in the middle of the night. They have become dispirited by the exigencies of what others call the “real world,” by the number of questionable practices in which they have taken part, by the number of thorny problems they have tried to resolve. They stop doing homework, act out via pranks that are sometimes funny, sometimes just angry, or withdraw physically and emotionally. They threaten perfectly healthy relationships that, earlier, they had taken some care to build, and the only reason they can find for doing so leads them to express a cynicism about their school, their town, their families, and their teachers that they may not want to feel.

For years I taught seniors and was involved in those relationships. I expected the students I knew to withstand the destructive culture that had grown up around the spring term. When they could not, I was disappointed, hurt; I blamed them and myself. I considered “senioritis” a collection of individual failures, including my own.
What Can We Do About It?

Experiencing the senior culture more broadly has lent perspective. It has given me a chance once again to recognize senior year as a multidimensional challenge for them as well as a frustration for us. Even though we adults may have been seniors in high school once, we need both a reminder and an update. The far-flung and anonymous seniors whom I interviewed, their words and their stories, may help us find the excitement, confusion, and sensitivity—perhaps even the charm—that still resides in the youngsters we ourselves deal with. Seeing the experience and the culture of the senior year for what it has become may help us understand and appreciate the individuals who are caught up in it.

But we need more than just sympathy and adjustment. We need change, and this is step three. There are not going to be any cheap or quick fixes. We have to solve our problem as Americans, not just as competitors in a world economy. A terrifying national exam would change some aspects of the experience for high school seniors and the adults who care for them. It would provide a certain motivation and end some of the malingering. But it would not necessarily improve the seniors as learners or as people.

Holding on to the structure of senior year but jamming it with a panoply of watered-down courses is more than a failure of imagination; it is a failure of purpose. Sending students away from high school without making an effort to shape their experiences or evaluate what they are learning is just as irresponsible, at least for those who intend to award a meaningful high school degree.

We can't abdicate the senior year; we need, instead, to redesign it. With the seniors' help, we need to examine the senior year for what should stay the same and what can be altered in small and even big ways. Perhaps we teachers should recognize that the academic growth that has been our worthy stock in trade for many years must be not abandoned, not cheapened, but altered to suit the seniors' changed circumstances. We need to treat high school seniors like adults nearly ready to become competent and fulfilled workers at real jobs, rather than as children out at recess for a whole year. But we need to decide these questions, high school by high school, by looking at the experience full in the face, as an expression of our personal but also of our national values.
We need new, more authentic, more impressive academic hurdles and rituals. We need to define academic growth differently, with skills, habits, and attitudes taking on more importance, “carnegie units” and memorization somewhat less. We need more fully to acknowledge—and learn how to assess—other kinds of growth. A change in the seniors’ routines and expectations does not necessarily mean a decline in academic challenge. Taking stock, reflection, synthesis, a senior seminar, a capstone senior project, immersion into a demanding workplace, and the intelligent assembling of the material needed to make good decisions about their own future would be worthy ways for seniors to spend their time. There would still be room in the senior program for making up for lost ground where it is needed and for offering demanding courses where they are called for. There is much we could do.

And there is much we must do. Most of all, we need to bring about a more graceful transition between high school and what follows it. Our goal is to leave all the participants feeling that the senior year was a glory time but also one of permanent usefulness, one to feel proud of after all. High school seniors need to live productively in the present even as they prepare intelligently for the future. It is a tall order, but they are up to it. And we parents and teachers need to understand and help them at the same time we prepare to let them go.

A school principal recently told me, “We failed our students’ senior year, because we didn’t help them become sturdy enough to thrive—or even survive—in the first year after high school.” He and his faculty are completely redesigning the experience they are offering, concentrating on the special challenges seniors face, helping each one develop the appropriate academic and emotional skills. I really admire that principal and faculty for their willingness to accept responsibility and to get to work. I hope this book will help them do so.
Thank you for sampling this resource.

For more information or to purchase, please visit Heinemann by clicking the link below:


Use of this material is solely for individual, noncommercial use and is for informational purposes only.