Senioritis

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A Case of Senioritis: Dan

- Senior at a public high school in an affluent suburban community
- Excelled in school through 11th grade
- In 11th grade academic pressure increased from parents, teachers, and guidance counselors
- In 12th grade he withdrew from extra-curricular activities and leadership roles after submission of his college applications
- When Dan found out he was not accepted to his first choice, he completely withdrew
- He accepted admission to one of his safety schools
What are your experiences with senioritis?
Definition of Senioritis

- The “year of slacking off” (Puente, 2012)
- Final semester after admissions... December/January (Dunn, 2001)
- “Vast wasteland... an epidemic of disengagement” (Dreis & Rehage, 2008)
- “Senior slump is part of American high school culture” (Kirst, 2001)
- “An underused educational resource, the senior year of high school” (Kirst, 2001)
What leads to senioritis?

- Extremely competitive and highly stressful college application process leads to burnout.

- College admission is seen as the final milestone for high school students, not academic learning.

- College admission is the goal trivializing the importance of learning and education.

- Teachers/school counselors may also experience senioritis as they view their jobs as done after college admission is complete.
Why is college admission in the U.S. increasingly stressful?

- More HS students are seeking admission than ever before, including international and older students.
- Students are applying to more colleges to widen their options due to the competitive admissions process.
- Ease of applying online and the common application leads to students applying to over 20-30 schools.
- More competition means more stringent admissions requirements.
Consequences of Competitive College Admissions

- HS administrators may not limit the # of allowed AP courses because this may disadvantage students

- Student performance and # of AP classes offered affect HS rankings, and in turn increase real estate values

- HS rankings in publications, state school report cards, and merit pay for teachers depend on student performance and rigor of curriculum

- Students are looking to get into the best college instead of pursuing goals which fit their personal interests and values. (Vasalampi, Salmela-Aro, Nurmi, 2009).
Increasingly competitive college admissions also leads to:

- Students engaging in many extracurricular activities to enhance their resumes
- Not only trying to excel academically but also in sports and the arts
- Numerous hours of effort (extracurricular activities, being tutored, musical lessons)

Ultimately, stress and potentially burnout.
The Problem with Narrowly Focusing on Tests and Grades

- Cheating
- Procrastination and cramming for tests
- Differential levels of school engagement (e.g., taking notes only when one will be tested on material)
- High-stakes testing leading to teaching to the test
- The ASCA Model may create stress for counselors as all students are expected to achieve to high levels and have college opportunities
Factors Contributing to Senioritis

- College admission calendar stresses the importance of working hard sophomore and junior year, with no real incentives for senior year.

- Emphasis on access and admission to college rather than learning tools to succeed in college.

- A lack of coherence and sequencing between the K-12 system and colleges.

- Importance of good grades and prestige based extracurricular activities instead of fostering a love of learning and finding a hobby the students are passionate about.
Characteristics of Senioritis

- Unwilling to stay engaged in school
- Tardiness/ Absences
- Distractibility in class
- Sense of feeling trapped in a small place
- Failure to do schoolwork
- Not bringing needed school supplies to class
- Engagement in non-academic activities outside of school
“For the best-performing students, senior slump may begin in the fall after they are accepted to college under early admissions. For other college-bound students, senior slump begins soon after they have filed their college applications. For students not planning to attend college immediately, senior slump may begin the moment they feel confident they will graduate with their class.” (Kirst, 2001)
How Colleges are Responding to Senioritis

- Rescinding admissions offers
  - 21% of colleges rescinded acceptances in 2009 for approximately 10 students (National Association of College Admissions Counselors; NACAC, n.d.)
- Sending letters to remind students that they must maintain a focus on academics
Senioritis has consequences
Transition to College is Difficult

- Academically
  - Students with senioritis may not be prepared for college placement tests and are placed in remedial courses

- Socially
  - HS graduates may be leaving social support networks - family, friends

- Logistically
  - HS graduates may lack practical knowledge about daily life, survival know-how, and other personal and interpersonal skills to survive college (Rehage & Dreis, 2009).
Stressors for First Year College Students

- Limited financial experience/independence
- Inadequate coping strategies for handling stress
- Drug and alcohol abuse
- Time management or mismanagement
- Social difficulties with peers, teachers, employers
- Difficulty managing increased independent study and decreased levels of support from instructors (Brady & Allingham, 2007)
Costs of Senioritis

- High dropout rates among those college students who are unprepared for college-level work (Kirst, 2001).
- Poor academic skills among those high school graduates who move into the workforce or the military (Kirst, 2001).
- Rising cost of remediation
What can school counselors do?
School Counselors: 
Recommendations to Parents

- Help their children learn practical life skills to be successful
- Help by not pressuring their children to get into particular schools (e.g., Ivy League)
- Acknowledge that their son or daughter may be feeling burned out, tired, dealing with disappointment, and grieving
School Counselors: Consult with Teachers

- Emphasize the fun factor
- Apply college skills to high school routine
- Remind students of the value of their work:
- Emphasize how college is different from HS
School Counselors can work with teachers to:

- Create programs that teach life skills
- Keep students engaged through independent capstone projects
- Facilitate internships
- Make dual enrollment available to more students
- Encourage seniors to take leadership roles in school

*Research on effectiveness of these programs is often lacking*
School Counselors at Work

Example at New Trier Township High School in Winnetka, IL (Rehage & Dreis, 2009)

- Conduct needs assessment - student voice survey - monitoring motivation and engagement
- Formation of senior guidance committee including students, teachers, counselors
- Senior assembly to announce results of needs assessment
- Focus on senior year as a vital transition to the real world
- Sponsor activities - workshops, guest speakers, seminars, all-day senior institute
Example: New Trier Township High School Winnetka, Illinois

- Yearlong service project for Habitat for Humanity
- Senior class raises $100,000 for materials to build one house in nearby county and another in the Philippines
- Students work on fundraising and hands-on construction

(Puente, 2012)
School Counselors: Help Students Grieve and Adjust

- A large number of students may not be accepted to their top choice(s)
- Some students may not be accepted to any college
- Counselors must acknowledge and empathize with students’ feelings of rejection and disappointment
- Emphasize that the college's rank or status is less important than whether it offers programs that match the student's interests
Summary

- Senioritis is very widespread.
- Senioritis has consequences for the student, the HS, and the university.
- School counselors can teach students life skills and academic skills to be successful in college.
- School counselors should advocate to parents and teachers the importance of setting students up for success after HS graduation.
Open Discussion

What have you done or can you do to combat senioritis in your schools??
References

Baird, R. (2012). *Counterfeit kids: Why they can’t think and how to save them*. ADD PUBLISHER


