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## Providing Meaningful Alternatives to Senior Examinations

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## Providing Meaningful Alternatives to Senior Examinations

### Abstract

Christian educators have a unique calling to equip their students to become active disciples of Jesus Christ. In 2001, the staff of Unity Christian High School was challenged to examine its teaching practices in this light. After a review of the current literature, two goals were adopted: (1) to provide greater opportunities for students to “unwrap their gifts” and (2) to broaden the use of authentic assessment. The staff began by amending the graduation requirements of the 2002 graduating class. Second semester exams were no longer to be administered to the seniors, and students were required to make contributions to portfolios. As an alternative closure experience, seniors were required to write reflection papers and to plan and perform a presentation. The purpose was to provide an opportunity for students to reflect upon their years of Christian education, to tell their stories and to share their gifts, burdens and joys. From this “experiment”, a research question soon emerged: Which closure experience is more meaningful for Unity students: senior examinations or senior projects?

Both the anecdotal evidence and the survey results indicate that the graduating class of 2002 was far more engaged in its work at Unity during the final weeks of school than the students of 2001 who completed senior examinations. The senior reflection papers resound with a positive reception of this process. Alumni surveys 15 months after graduation further indicate strong approval for the alternative culminating activity.

Other stakeholders in this process (teachers, board members, parents and supporters) have less formally voiced their support. Even though Unity is now in its third year of the new program, more development is necessary. The goal remains the same: for the senior project to evolve into the “Capstone of the K-12 Christian Education Experience.”

### Document Type

Thesis

### Degree Name

Master of Education (MEd)

### Department

Graduate Education

### Keywords

Master of Education, thesis, Unity Christian High School, high school students, senior project program, Christian education

### Subject Categories

Curriculum and Instruction | Education

### Comments

Action Research Report Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Education

Providing Meaningful Alternatives to Senior Examinations

By

Mary Dirksen

B.A. Dordt College

Action Research Report  
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the  
Degree of Master of Education

Department of Education  
Dordt College  
Sioux Center, Iowa  
January, 2004

Providing Meaningful Alternatives to Senior Examinations

By

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## Abstract

Christian educators have a unique calling to equip their students to become active disciples of Jesus Christ. In 2001, the staff of Unity Christian High School was challenged to examine its teaching practices in this light. After a review of the current literature, two goals were adopted: (1) to provide greater opportunities for students to “unwrap their gifts” and (2) to broaden the use of authentic assessment. The staff began by amending the graduation requirements of the 2002 graduating class. Second semester exams were no longer to be administered to the seniors, and students were required to make contributions to portfolios. As an alternative closure experience, seniors were required to write reflection papers and to plan and perform a presentation. The purpose was to provide an opportunity for students to reflect upon their years of Christian education, to tell their stories and to share their gifts, burdens and joys. From this “experiment”, a research question soon emerged: Which closure experience is more meaningful for Unity students: senior examinations or senior projects?

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Other stakeholders in this process (teachers, board members, parents and supporters) have less formally voiced their support. Even though Unity is now in its third year of the new program, more development is necessary. The goal remains the same: for the senior project to evolve into the “Capstone of the K-12 Christian Education Experience.”



## Introduction

In 2001, a project at Unity Christian High School began that became both a major undertaking and a great joy. Three separate in-services were held at which the faculty sought ways in which they could effectively “turn their world upside down”.

How did the concept for senior projects originate? Throughout the 2000-2001 school year the work began in earnest to create some kind of alternative assessment tool for the seniors of Unity Christian High School. The faculty and student council had for years questioned the authenticity of senior examinations. Very few students prepared for the exams, and students quickly became disengaged during the final weeks of school. A number of options were considered, and eventually the staff concluded that their students would best be served by replacing second semester senior examinations with a more meaningful closure activity.

Extensive research began, and particular attention was given to the value of more authentic assessment tools. Contact was made with three CSI schools that had adopted some kind of senior project format: Lynden Christian High School, Manhattan Christian High School and Desert Christian High School. A study of Internet website models also followed. After much discussion, the faculty devised a policy that they believed best fit the needs of students and climate of Unity Christian High School (UCHS). The Education Committee recommended the new policy to the Board, which voted unanimously to implement the new senior project format for the 2001-2002 school year (see Appendix A).

The goals of the new senior project are:

1. Culmination-a more meaningful closure experience for the senior students.

2. Articulation-opportunity to reflect on the value of their education/faith or to develop personal world and life views.
3. Integration-an intentional effort to connect the work of each student from year to year.

The new senior project policy stated that Unity students would now be required to:

1. Develop a portfolio-defined as a collection of work, such as documents, projects, essays, artwork, certificates, creative writing, that displays the student's unique skills, achievements and experiences during the Unity years.
2. Write a 3 to 5-page reflection paper-for the purpose of looking back as they look ahead.
3. Create a 15-20 minute presentation-during which students were encouraged to address such common themes as: How has God led you throughout your years at Unity? What have been your greatest blessings/struggles and how has God used these for your good? How has your high school experience prepared you for your post-high plans? What is your worldview, and how has it affected your decisions?

No grades were to be assigned to any of the elements of the senior projects. It was discussed whether or not it would be appropriate to create some kind of rubric evaluation. A decision was made to assess the projects only on the basis of the completion of the basic requirements and to allow the accomplishment of the project to be its own reward.

To summarize, the three main goals were first, to provide a more meaningful closure experience for the senior students; second, to require the seniors to spend some time in reflection and to articulate their world and life views; and third to increase the appreciation and integration of learning that was taking place at Unity and the

connectiveness of each student's work from year to year.

The three requirements of the senior project addressed each of the three goals. The portfolios were intended to accomplish goal #3 (Appreciation and Integration); the senior reflection paper was initiated to fulfill goal #2 (Articulation); and the senior presentation was designed to implement goal #1 (Culmination).

How were the students introduced to the concept of senior projects? In September of 2001, the new program was first explained to the students during a chapel program. Following the theme for the year, "Rejoicing in the Lord," the students were told that they would all have the opportunity to participate because all Unity students would be required to contribute to a personal portfolio throughout the year. A portfolio was defined for them as a collection of work and achievements over their four years at UCHS, a reflection of how God was speaking to them, blessing them, guiding them, molding them. Suggested items included: documents, projects, essays, creative writing, artwork, music, certificates, photographs and multi media projects.

Seniors were then addressed at this chapel. They would now be required to complete a senior project that will take the place of the second semester senior exams. The project would include a 15-minute presentation and a 3 to 5-page reflection paper/statement of faith. Suggested topics included: How God led them during their years at UCHS; blessings and struggles and how God used these for their good; preparation for post-high years and their worldview. Suggested formats included: posters, collages, performances, demonstrations, readings, PowerPoint presentations, videos, flow charts, and artwork. This chapel presentation was met with many questions and concerns on the part of the seniors, reputed to be an unusually energetic and outspoken group of students.

On September 20, an early dismissal created an occasion for the seniors to remain

at school in order to meet for the first time with their mentors to discuss deadlines and brainstorm ideas for the presentations. Each faculty member was assigned from 3-5 senior students to mentor. The mentor selections were based upon relationships that had already been established between students and teachers. Unity teachers readily involve themselves in the lives of their students, and it was an easy task to match the students and teachers. Because new staff members had joined the staff that year, students were assigned to them who were presently enrolled in their classes (as in Senior Mathematics or Advanced Spanish).

It was during the first mentor meetings that it was discovered that the success of the senior project concept might directly relate to the enthusiasm of the mentor. While most of the teachers eagerly “owned” the idea, a few were reticent. A “faculty debriefing” followed the initial mentor meetings, and the ensuing discussion was most valuable as teachers were able to share ideas and trouble-shooting strategies.

The school year proceeded, and each due date was met without any significant changes or challenges. Students actually became enthusiastic toward the end of the second semester, and teachers noted that there was a marked increase in energy level and flow of ‘creative juices.’

May 20, 2002 was the date of the first “Senior Celebration Night”, which would later be combined with the Annual Awards Ice Cream Social. 100% participation was enjoyed that evening. Students were assigned to a classroom and a 20-minute block of time. Their mentor, parents and other invited guests joined them as they made their presentations. Although the evening was deemed to be a success by students, teachers, parents and friends, it was unclear if the goals had been met. Each student had “passed” because all of the requirements had been met. But, had the students experienced a richer and more meaningful closure experience? Was the portfolio, reflection paper, senior

presentation a “meaningful alternative to senior examinations”?

The class of 2002 was the first to experience this new “capstone of Christian education” initiative. Informal or anecdotal evidence indicates that the Unity community was pleased with the results. Teachers, parents, students, supporters, and friends enjoyed the new format. They felt that the goals had been met and were surprised by the unexpected blessings that were derived from the senior projects and papers. Improvements could and would be made to either increase the benefits or to better fit the needs of a particular class.

Not being satisfied with the anecdotal evidence, the researcher decided to conduct a more formal survey of the graduates. The researcher chose to contact both the last group of seniors to take senior exams and the first group to fulfill the requirements of the senior project. The goal was to share this information with the stakeholders of the school. The staff in particular wanted to see if its recent alumni felt that the senior projects were a more fitting culminating experience for them.

During the summer of 2002, questions for the alumni survey were written. The desire was to question the graduates at least 15 months after their graduation from Unity. During the fall of 2002, the researcher surveyed the Class of 2001 (see Appendix B). In October of 2003, the Class of 2002 was surveyed (see Appendix C).

In summary, the research question that the school sought to address was: which closure experience is more meaningful for our senior students-senior examinations or senior projects? The hypothesis is as follows: students who engaged in the senior project will have a more reflective and meaningful closure experience than the seniors who took exams.

### Review of Literature

The literature on the topic of alternatives to senior examinations is rich and varied. For many years, educators have sought new and improved methods of so-called authentic assessment and have questioned the value of exams and grades.

Parker Palmer (2000) suggests that “our deepest calling is to grow into our own authentic self-hood” (p. 16). He states that all individuals seek a “deeper congruence between the inner and outer life” (p. 37). However, when students are subjected to standardized testing, they are taken out of the real world context and forced to engage in an exercise that is focused upon impersonal, short questions with clear-cut answers. Studies link standardized testing to increased dropout rates (Kohn, 1999), student irresponsibility (Wood, 1999), disruption of student learning (Levine, 2002), and passivity (Erickson, 2001). By their very nature, testing and grades promote low-level skills, temporary retention, competition, ranking and underachievement. (Levine, 2002). Alfie Kohn (1999) calls testing “ludicrously contrived” (p. 85) and asks an intriguing question: “How many jobs demand that that employees come up with the right answer on the spot, from memory with the clock ticking?” (Kohn, 1999, p. 85). In the real world, we base our judgments of competence on actual performance and not on artificial exercises.

Daniels, Bizan and Zemelman use a study from the Principal Investigators for Local Systematic Change to make their case that “grades actually have a negative effect on student learning” (Daniels, 2001, pp. 225-6). Junior and senior students were taught the same content, but received differing feedback from their teachers. The group that was given only comments upon their work showed a 30 percent “gain in learning”. The two groups who had received just grades or grades and comments showed “no gain in

learning” (Daniels, 2001, p. 226). The study seems to indicate that comments are more conducive to learning.

Educational pundits insist that schools must do more to prepare its students for the real world. The mandate from Scripture is also very clear: students and teachers alike are to work at their callings as if they are working for the Lord: “Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord and not for men...it is the Lord Christ you are serving” (Colossians 3:23-24, New International Version). Yet, our present educational system causes seniors in our high schools to struggle to stay motivated and focused (Cure Senioritis, 2000).

Christian schools must take the time to evaluate their senior closure experiences. N.T. Wright issues a powerful challenge for Christians to “be on the leading edge of the whole culture, articulating in story and music and art and philosophy and education and poetry and politics and theology and even, heaven help us, biblical studies, a worldview that will mount the historically rooted Christian challenge to both modernity and post modernity, leading the way into the post postmodern world with joy and humor and gentleness and good judgment and true wisdom” (Wright, 1999, p. 196).

Yet Christian schools remain entrenched in an approach to high school as a collection of credits that does little to engage students’ minds. “First we read the state guidelines or how many credits per subject area a student needs. Then we simply spread courses throughout the high school experience so that students will have the opportunity to gather enough credits for graduation” (Woods, 1999, p. 91).

For ten years, *A Vision with a Task* has echoed this call for authentic assessment. Because they advocate a program of learning for responsive discipleship, the authors recommend that schools “broaden their range of assessment and evaluation to include portfolios of student work...performance tasks, student self-evaluation and exhibitions...

and consider the extent to which they can replace standardized tests and grades with more formative and informative assessment procedures” (Stronks and Blomberg, 1993, p. 308). Our overarching goal, after all is to encourage students to “unwrap gifts, share joys, and bear each other’s burdens and seek shalom within and outside the school” (p. 304).

Having stated the need to replace tests with authentic assessment, what solutions does the current literature suggest? The three alternative assessment models that are most dominant are portfolios, senior projects and story telling. Portfolios can be simply defined as a “collection of student work that tells a story over time” (Erickson, 2001, p. 160). Portfolios are valuable because they emphasize reflection, self-selection and student participation. The selection process is an opportunity for them to “reflect upon their past learning as well as to set new goals” (Kohn, 1999, p. 193). Portfolios provide a connective framework for the students. They are collaborative and have many potential audiences, such as teachers, peers, younger aged students, and parents. Students can be encouraged to submit items to fit a variety of criteria such as “best work, examples of growth, display of genres covered, artistic merit, or demonstration of a particular skill” (Daniels, 2001, p. 221).

Programs that embrace some kind of senior project format are rapidly gaining popularity. The search engine *Google* (2003) produced over 1,580,000 individual high school senior project “hits”. A random study of these sites reveals that most schools require some combination of research, service project and exhibition. Senior projects are described as authentic or performance-based because students must demonstrate their “mastery of skills and personal qualities that matter in the world outside of school” (Levine, 2002). Common elements are: careful planning by the students, allowing the selection of an area of particular interest, assignment of a mentor, time logs or journals and a final presentation (Cure Senioritis, 2000). Schools in states such as Oregon have



had such programs in place for over 13 years (Chadwell, 1991). Many studies indicate that senior projects can be linked to improved student performance (Bottoms, 2000). Students reported that the experience allowed them to develop a variety of communication, interpersonal, organization and work-related skills (Egelson, Harman and Bond, 2002).

Member schools of Christian Schools International are a bit slower to embrace senior projects. Although executive director Dan Vander Ark calls the senior project the “capstone of the Christian education experience,” he noted there were only three schools that have made significant movement toward embracing senior projects: Lynden Christian High School, Manhattan Christian High School and Desert Christian High School (personal communication, September 10, 2002).

Story telling is a relatively new addition to the literature on authentic assessment models and yet it has ancient roots. “Everybody’s got a story and most people love to share their stories,” says Dordt professor James Schaap (De Young, 2003, p. 2). As an educational tool, story telling has great value for senior high school students who are seeking to embrace their wholeness (Palmer, 2000). Our stories tell us who we are, why we are here and what we are to do. “By better understanding the story and our role as characters, we can live more purposefully the kind of life that will give our story meaning” (Taylor, 2001, p. 4). The process of storying creates meaning, is a tool for remembering, allows for context and connectiveness, and provides a sense of community (Drake, 1998). More and more educators understand the pivotal role that story telling can play in the emerging world of authentic assessment.

What specific evidence is there that the schools that are embracing alternative assessments are reaching their goals? Highland Park High School eliminated all daily, weekly and midsemester grades from a pilot group of courses. In the ensuing three

years, they enjoyed positive feedback from all stakeholders, including “little resistance” and even enthusiastic support from a cross section of parents. Teachers reported that removing the burden of daily grading “opened up and deepened their instruction” (Daniels, 2001, p. 227).

In North Carolina, four “Senior Project” schools were matched with four non-Senior Project schools for a field study. One of the study’s research questions asked if there were differences in the students’ academic and formative experiences. The findings revealed a “strong association” between Senior Project graduates and the opportunity to apply speech making and research skills successfully. Over half of the survey respondents from Senior Project schools felt that their experience had helped to shape their future plans, and 75% reported developing specific skills, such as planning, organization and time management (Bond, 2003, p. 26). Although graduates from both types of schools reported that these skills were in high demand outside of high school, Senior Project students felt that they had learned to a greater degree how to research, prepare and present speeches than their non-Senior Project counterparts (Bond, 2003, p. 25).

Desert Christian High School Christian testified that their goal to provide opportunity for “active learning” has been met by their Senior Expo format. According to a sampling of their students upon completion of the Expo, the Senior Expo gave many of them an occasion to apply what they had learned to a real world environment, and gave them a voice in the educational process (Keltner, 2002).

The senior presentation at Lynden Christian High School had a similar goal. Prior to the initiation of their senior presentations, a survey indicated that as many as 25% of its students lacked focus and direction. Unfortunately no survey was taken after the implementation of the senior presentation. However, teachers attested that their students

were more thoughtful about their worldviews and more focused about their purpose (Vander Griend, 2002).

What is lacking in the literature, however, is direct contact with the graduates after a period of time. As Sally Bond of the Senior Project Program Evaluation Group states, “The real value of the Senior Project is not likely to be realized until students are out of high school and called upon to use their Senior-Project related knowledge and skills in a real-world setting” (Bond, 2003, p. 26).

Unity Christian High School would indeed benefit from the opportunity to hear from its graduates. The hypothesis needs to be tested and the question has to be asked of its graduates: Which closure experience is more meaningful: senior examinations or senior projects?

### Method

Two groups of alumni students were surveyed. One group was the class of 2001: the last group to take senior examinations. The second group was the class of 2002: the first to complete the alternative senior projects. Both groups of students were contacted 15 months following their respective graduations. Therefore surveys were sent out in the fall of 2002 to the graduates of 2001 (see Appendix B), and surveys were sent in the fall of 2003 to the graduates of 2002 (see Appendix C). The questions were intended to be open ended, but they would not be identical. The 2001 graduates were asked:

What opportunity did Unity provide for reflection upon your years at Unity?

Was there adequate opportunity to celebrate your gifts and accomplishments?

Of what value were senior exams to you? Should Unity have senior exams?

The 2002 graduates were asked the same two questions, but the third was worded differently: Of what value were the portfolios, senior papers and senior presentations to

you or to the school? Should Unity have senior exams or senior projects?

The responses are so relevant to the on-going work of curriculum development that the researcher will continue to administer the alumni surveys every year.

The method of analyzing the data will be qualitative with a descriptive analysis of the results. Conclusions derived from the research will be specific to the setting and holistic in the interpretation (Wiersma, 1995, p. 13). The researcher seeks to capture and study the perceptions of the alumni. In response to question one, "What opportunity did Unity provide for reflection?", analysis will be grouped into two categories: "None" and "Not much" will be one category; and "Some" will be another. It is perceived by the researcher that all responses will fit into these two categories. For question number two, "Was there adequate opportunity to celebrate your gifts and accomplishments?", item analysis will again be grouped into two categories: "No" and "Very little" will be grouped together, and the response "Yes" will be the second category. Finally, question three will require more extensive grouping. The senior exam respondents were asked, "Of what value were senior exams to you?" The analysis will fall into three categories: "No Value", "Some Value", and "Significant Value". The senior project respondents were asked, "Of what value were the portfolios, senior papers and senior presentations to you or to the school?" Their responses will also be categorized as: "No Value", "Some Value" and "Significant Value".

The design does have limitations. A high rate of non-response may indicate that the data is biased. The question will have to be answered: Does the sample represent the group that is under study adequately? If the ratio of college and non-college respondents matches the ratio of the entire population, the analysis will have greater value.

Interestingly, communication with several other senior project schools indicated that surveying alumni was a very low priority. Lack of time and resources was the

primary reason given for the decision not to contact graduates (Rehage, 2003). All the schools that the researcher contacted acclaimed anecdotal evidence that their students were being motivated. The review of literature also indicated that school officials enjoyed great support from teachers and parents (Daniels, 2001, p. 227). No formal surveying was deemed necessary. The Unity survey therefore was designed with only one unique population in mind: Unity Christian High School graduates. There may or may not be implications for other schools. The generalizability of the results is very small and may only extend to future Unity graduates.

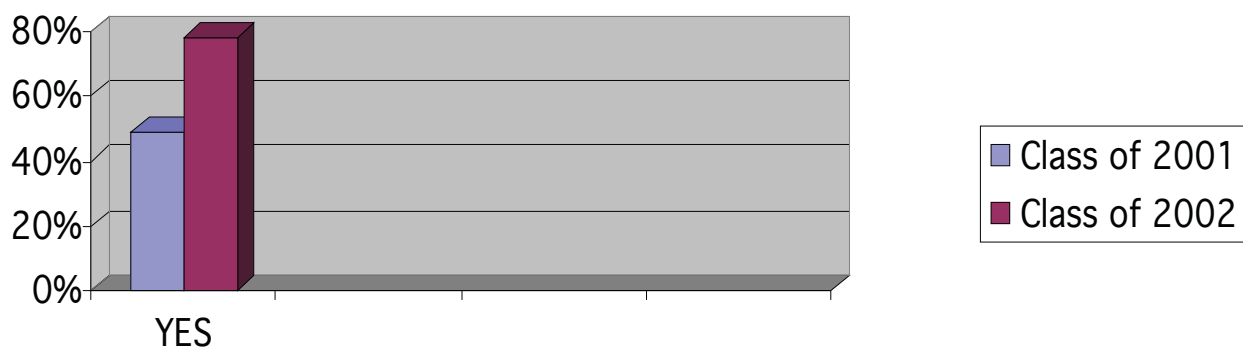
### Results

The total number of survey respondents was not impressive from either the class of 2001 or 2002. Unity received a 43% return from its 2001 graduates and 45% from 2002. Both classes had identical percentages in terms of the “types” of respondents that returned the surveys. In other words if the data is coded according to postsecondary “choice” of respondents, 80% of the respondents stated that they were currently attending a four-year college for both 2001 and 2002. In actuality, 69% and 70% of the total population of graduates from the classes of 2001 and 2002 respectively enrolled at four-year colleges. The survey sampling is not as accurate a representation of both graduating classes in terms of gender. 60% and 67% of the respondents from the classes of 2001 and 2002 were female, respectively, whereas in actuality the class population was 56% female for 2001 and 52% female for 2002.

In response to the first question: “What opportunity did Unity provide for reflection upon your years at Unity?”, the class of 2001 was split as to whether or not they felt that they had opportunity for reflection. 51% said they had “None” or “Not much” and 49% shared that they had “some” opportunity for reflection such as

graduation, and senior chapel. These results contrast sharply with our “senior project” group, 78% of whom stated that they had “Some” opportunity for reflection and 56% specifically mentioned senior projects as their vehicle for reflection. More specifically, one 2001 respondent stated that the senior prom video (composed of selected childhood pictures of each graduate) was somewhat reflective. Another student added that graduation ceremony was a reflective activity, and a third stated that some reflection took place through “special chapels” that she experienced. 2002 class members were far more

## Was There Opportunity for Reflection?



explicit stating, “I guess the only thing that I did that could have been considered reflecting would have to be the senior project”. Shared another student, “Through my senior project I was able to reflect on my years of high school”. Others added “Serving as Living Group Leader”, “Talking with friends” and “Setting goals for each new year” as reflective experiences.

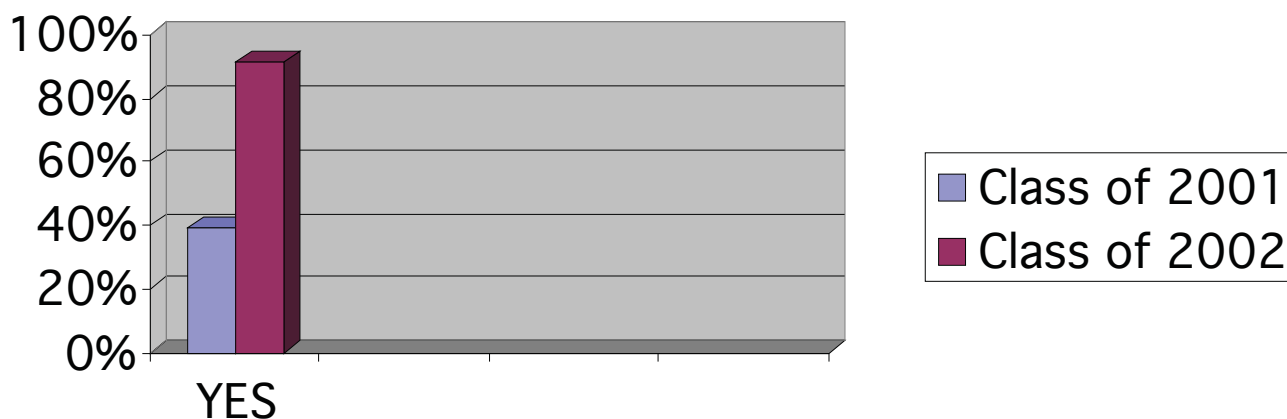
In response to question two: “Was there adequate opportunity to celebrate your gifts and accomplishments?”, 61% of the senior exam students said “No” or felt that they had “Very little” opportunity to celebrate their gifts and accomplishments. Of the 39% who responded “Yes”, some referred to the annual awards ceremony and graduation;

others stated “I was involved in musical activity, so I had lots of opportunity”, “Yes, through athletics and academic honors”, and “You have to find the opportunities”.

However, despite these few positive comments, most students just said “No,” and did not elaborate. Of the senior project group, only 9% had that same negative sentiment.

91% of the class of 2002 responded “Yes”, that they did have adequate opportunity to celebrate their gifts and accomplishments. This class was more reflective and listed competitions, theatre, band, art, sports, academics, drill team, mentor encouragement and teacher guidance, as well as the annual awards ceremony, chapels and graduation as their opportunities for celebration. Some comments were:, “I think that Unity really strives to help each student learn what they’re good at”, “Senior projects allow students to be acknowledged for their special and unique accomplishments”, “Faculty comments and encouragement meant a lot.”

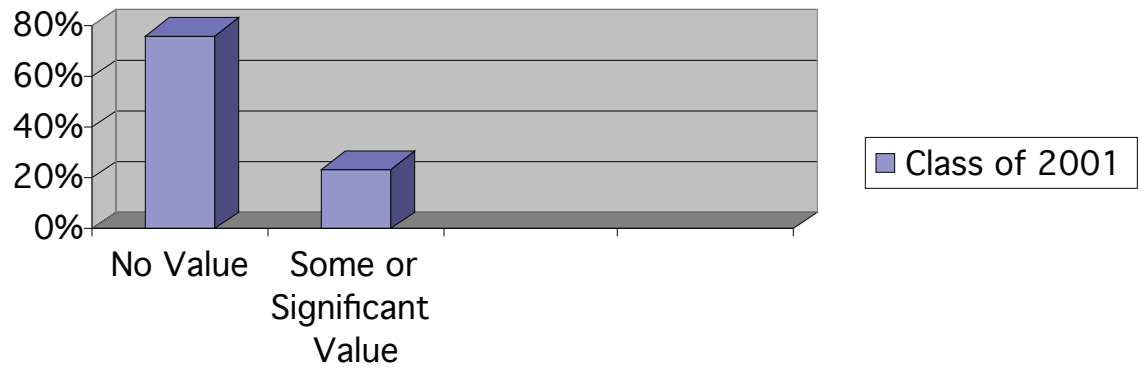
### Was There Opportunity for the Celebration of Your Gifts?



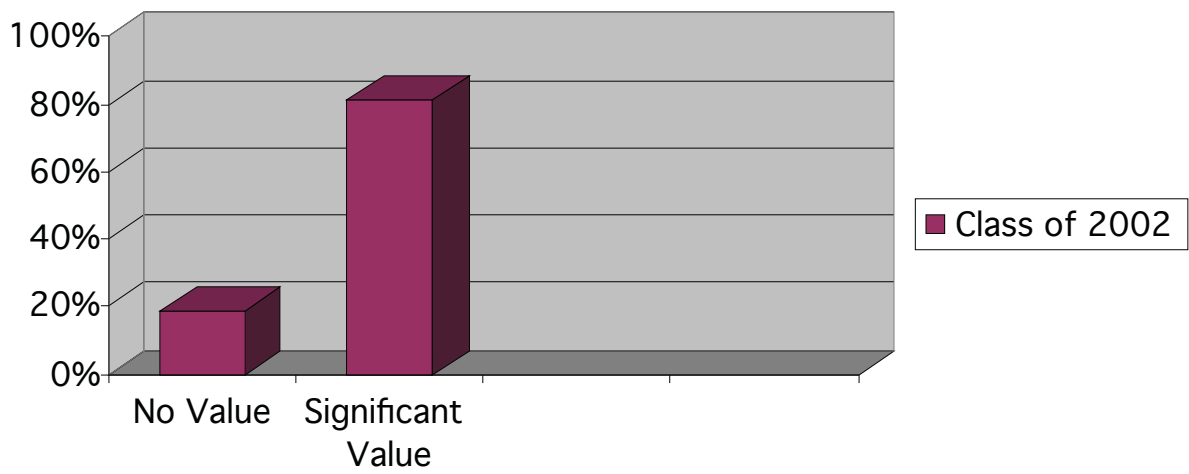
Question three was phrased differently for the two groups. 2002 graduates were asked: "Of what value were senior exams to you?" 76% of the 2002 survey respondents said "No value"; 24% said "Some" or even "Significant value". Among the comments were such remarks as "they (the exams) didn't really matter for me because I had already been accepted into college", "everyone is ready to leave, so no one cares", "nobody studies", "they don't matter", "pointless, but if you study, they do prepare you for college." The class of 2003 was asked: "Of what value was the Senior Project to you?" Nineteen percent of the 2002 respondents said little or "No Value". Some stated that the exams would have been a lot easier for them; others admitted to putting little effort into the preparation for their presentations and therefore felt that it was a waste of time. On the positive side, 81% found the senior projects to be relevant and beneficial for a number of reasons: "they are something meaningful;" "it allowed me to look at high school in a whole new light;" "they were a way to reflect and to thank parents and teachers for all they had done for us;" "they are less stressful, more meaningful and more fun;" "it was cool and I will value it forever;" "it was nice at the end of the year to finish celebrating my time there rather than taking a test;" "it was a good way to leave one place looking onward to another;" "it really brought things into perspective for me;" "this actually means something to us personally, and for our loved ones and for our peers;" and "the projects have much more opportunity for learning than the exams and were much more worthwhile."



## Was There Value in taking Senior Exams?



## Was There Value in Completing the Senior Project?



As a summative question, both classes were asked if Unity should have senior examinations or senior projects. It should be noted here that the class of 2001 was exposed to the concept; it was discussed heavily by the student body and presented to the student council. The responses were very similar for both classes. For the class of 2001: 14% chose exams; 79% chose the senior projects, 7% suggested that Unity allow the students to choose. For the class of 2002: 16% chose senior exams; 78% chose senior projects; 3% suggested that Unity allow the students to choose; and 3% said neither.

To the researcher, the responses to question three are most significant. Using the funnel approach, the researcher can make the data analysis more focused and directed (Wiersma, 1995, p. 219). The other data can be set aside for the purpose of this study, and the interpretation can now become more narrow.

The major assertion therefore is that the research question has been answered and the hypothesis is correct: students who engaged in the senior project will have a more reflective and meaningful closure experience than the seniors who took exams. 79% and 78% of the 2001 and 2002 classes respectively chose Senior Projects over Senior Exams as a closure activity.

Anecdotally, it should also be stated that the senior reflection papers are rewarding to read, particularly those authored by the class that christened the senior project concept. Many students were metaphorical, likening themselves to acorns, caterpillars, blooming roses or riders on a roller coaster. Other students used the senior reflection papers as a vehicle for thanking their parents. Wrote Student B: "I owe my parents a great deal of thanks for the memories that I have made. It is often said that your teenage years are some of the best years of your life. For me it has been true. I have developed many lasting relationships with friends, faculty and staff. I know it took a lot of sacrifice on your part every time those tuition statements came home. Let me tell you that it was worth it." Although it is difficult to measure the authenticity of senior sentiment, many students did state that the reflective experience was real, relevant and meaningful. Student C shared: "I have to say that when we found out we were doing senior projects, I was pretty worried. I didn't have the 'perfect' testimony to share, my relationship (with God) was far from what it should have been, and I didn't even like school! I had no idea what I would say. Then, as my senior year 'happened', so many

things changed.”

Unity’s first “batch” of senior presentations were as varied as the reflections papers and included 35 videos, 22 readings, 18 PowerPoint presentations, 9 collages, 9 art exhibits, 7 CAD demonstrations, 6 musical performances, 6 science projects, 4 metaphors, 2 dance routines, a dollhouse tour, an arranging of cut flowers and a radio show performance.

Parents who voiced concern about senior papers and presentations became relieved and thankful at the conclusion. Most rewarding were the parents who compared the senior presentation night to kindergarten round-up. One day, they entered the halls of the elementary school hand in hand with their child, and 14 years later, they depart together from high school with celebration and rejoicing. Senior presentation night was a culminating experience, indeed.

## Discussion

In 2001, the staff of Unity Christian High School made a communal decision to enrich the educational experience of its students. The academic goals at Unity remained the same. Semester exams would still be administered for seven out of the eight semesters and academic course requirements would still be met. A new dimension was added to the graduation experience that would embrace such personal learning goals as culmination, articulation and integration. Students would be given the rare opportunity to make a presentation. Academic goals would naturally be imbedded into such a project, but the rewards would be more intrinsic.

The students responded with unexpected compliance and more than just a smattering of enthusiasm. Survey results supported the hypothesis that students who engaged in the senior project would have a more reflective and meaningful closure experience than the seniors who took exams.

Sharing these results with educators who facilitate similar projects has been a true joy. Senior projects have been credited with keeping students occupied and curing senioritis nationwide (Dunn, 2001, p. 13). Yet, these programs do go through stages of metamorphosis. As the twelve-year veterans of the Senior Project at New Trier High School in Winnetka, Illinois testify, the primary goals of the program have undergone significant changes over the years. No longer are they seeking to merely keep students engaged at the end of the year. Self-advocacy is now their primary motive. In other words, the Senior Project is now said to provide opportunities for students to take control of their lives and to execute projects that are directly related to their passions and interests. In addition, these facilitators stated that the program has been “scaled down” with less requirements or “hurdles” for students to face along the way (Rehage, 2003).

What modifications does Unity anticipate? It is a joy (and a relief) for the staff

and students to be in their third year of the senior project. The faculty can now discuss more meaningfully different aspects of the program and if the original goals are being met (see Appendix D).

When asked if the quality of senior project requirements should be assessed more rigorously via a rubric or similar assessment tool, the faculty responded with a resounding “no”. Additional measurements are not necessary as the senior projects do have clear requirements that are already in place. Because the presentation is prepared for parents, extended family and friends, the quality is almost guaranteed. In many instances, the senior project becomes the senior student’s gift to teachers, parents and grandparents. Moreover, a presentation rehearsal is evaluated by the mentor days prior to the actual presentation. Teacher and student together discuss the quality. As Highland Park High School learned in their study, personal comments from teachers proved to be more effective in enhancing student learning than grades (Daniels, 2001, p. 227).

Should the senior project goals be more academic in nature? Again, the staff says “no”. Unity teachers stated the following in response to a questionnaire, “we went to the senior projects to fill a gap in a student’s total education;” “at no other time do we require all of our students to participate in such reflection;” “there is enough academic assessment over the four years;” “the presentations are a covenantal experience and are intrinsically rewarding to students, teachers, parents, and friends;” and “since when did second semester senior exams ever meet any academic goals?”

The staff is interested in seeing the senior project format continue to develop. Suggestions for future implementation include:

1. Creating an archive of really “good” senior projects to give student direction.
2. Assigning the mentor-teachers to complete similar reflective projects so

that they can become more familiar with the process.

3. Building up the substance of portfolio contributions by guiding them through the process more intentionally.
4. Allowing students opportunities to practice and gain experience in reflection in all subject areas throughout the school year.
5. Introducing an optional May activity similar to the New Trier Model, in which select students devote 130 hours to a community project with a local sponsor.

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## APPENDIX A

Senior Project Definition:

1. a collection of work that has been placed in the student's **portfolio** (documents, projects, essays, artwork, certificates, creative writing, etc., that display the student's unique skills, achievements and experiences during the Unity years).
2. a 3-5 page **reflection paper**.
3. a 15-20 minute **presentation** with a teacher/mentor present as well as other adults of the student's choosing. This presentation may take a variety of forms, but should address such common themes as: How has God led you throughout your years at Unity? What have been your greatest blessings/struggles and how has God used these for your good? How has your high school experience prepared you for your post-high plans? What is your worldview and how has it effected your decisions?  
(Please note: There is a 3 minute limit on videos!)
3. **Seniors** will be assigned a teacher to serve as a mentor throughout their senior year. Mentors will work with them as they prepare for their presentations and meet certain deadlines.

Senior Project Deadlines:

- ❖ Thursday, September 19: Meeting with mentors
- ❖ Monday, January 27: Outline of Reflection Paper due.
- ❖ Monday, February 24: 1<sup>st</sup> Draft due. Project Proposal Sheet due.
- ❖ Thursday, March 27: Chapel time meeting with mentors. Final Draft due.
- ❖ Week of April 28: Review Presentation with Mentor.
- ❖ Monday May 19: Senior Celebration Night

## APPENDIX B

### Unity Christian High School Graduate Survey Class of 2001

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Present Address: \_\_\_\_\_

Present School or Job: \_\_\_\_\_

Area of Study: \_\_\_\_\_

Please answer the following questions about your final semester at Unity:

- (1) What opportunity did Unity provide for reflection upon your years at Unity?
- (2) Was there adequate opportunity for the celebration of your gifts and accomplishments? If so, when?
- (3) Of what value were senior exams to you?
- (4) Should Unity have senior exams? Please explain

## APPENDIX C

### Unity Christian High School Graduate Survey

Class of 2002

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Present School or Job: \_\_\_\_\_

Please answer the following questions about your final semester at Unity:

- (1) What opportunity did Unity provide for reflection upon your years at Unity?
- (2) Was there adequate opportunity for the celebration of your gifts and accomplishments? If yes, how or when?
- (3) Of what value were the portfolio, senior reflection paper or senior project?
- (4) Should Unity have senior exams or senior projects? Please explain

APPENDIX D

**Teacher Questionnaire**

Please answer the following based upon your mentor experience and return to Mary D.

1. Describe your overall impression of the senior project format.

2. Senior Project Requirements: Should we be assessing quality of the projects (by way of some kind of rubric) instead of just completion?
3. Do you feel there is a gap that needs to be fixed between the our former **academic** goals (exams) and the **present personal** goals (senior project)?
4. Suggestions to improve the process?

## APPENDIX E

Department of Education  
Dordt College  
Sioux Center, Iowa

## VITA

Name: Mary A. Dirksen Date of Birth: May 15, 1957

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1975-1979 Dordt College, B.A. in Secondary Education, History and Social Sciences.