Reclaiming Senior Year

New learning opportunities that feed mind, body, and soul keep seniors energized in this private high school.

Kathleen D’Andrea

Twelfth graders chomp at the bit. They are ready to move on, but they don’t want to completely break those ties that bind. By providing opportunities for seniors to wean themselves away from traditional classrooms while still offering valuable educational experiences, Monsignor Donovan High School in Toms River, New Jersey, helps students develop the resiliency and intellectual qualities they need to make a healthy transition to post-high school life.

The Need for “Cruise” Control

Some high schools allow seniors who have completed their basic course requirements to leave school early in the day—or leave after the first semester—to take courses at a community college or seek employment. Florida now allows qualified students to forgo senior year, and Colorado is considering the same (Time to make . . ., 2004). A truncated senior year cuts students off from the culture and activities of the school. But if they are required to put in full days during senior year, 12th graders may "dumb down" coursework so they can cruise toward graduation. The National Commission on the High School Senior Year (2001) has called for high schools to

move away from a system in which the senior year is just more of the same to one in which the senior year provides time to explore options and prove knowledge and skills. (p. 22)

Monsignor Donovan is a private Catholic high school for grades 9–12, the only Catholic high school in suburban Ocean County. We serve students of varying academic ability—some of whom travel an hour by bus to school—and provide tuition help to families in need. The school has always embraced the viewpoint that the high school years are brief enough. Students should enjoy four full years of opportunities to grow in mind, body, and spirit within a stimulating environment, surrounded by peers and a caring faculty.

To keep nurturing the whole child right up to graduation, Monsignor Donovan offers all 12th graders the chance to pursue internships, independent study, retreats, or community service. Teachers supply the ideas and impetus for these courses, keeping seniors grounded in school but allowing them to spread their wings. Since we began implementing these programs six
years ago, more seniors have achieved the honor roll. Even more important, seniors remain engaged in school all year and stay in close contact after they graduate.

**Stimulating the Mind**

**Job-Shadowing Professionals**

Approximately 20 Monsignor Donovan students each year are accepted into the school's senior thesis seminar, which was developed several years ago by Donna Mulvaney, head of our English department. Each interested student submits an essay delineating why he or she should be included in the program and indicates a career direction he or she hopes to pursue. Once selected, each senior identifies a professional in the appropriate field who will allow that student to shadow him or her three times a week on the job. The other two weekly seminar periods are divided between research at the county library and attendance at a seminar-style class with other thesis students. The senior thesis class is scheduled during the second block of the day, and, combined with our 50-minute flex/lunch period, provides a two-hour block of time for students to fulfill their seminar commitments. Seminar classes often meet at a local luncheonette, with students sharing their experiences and getting feedback on their proposed theses.

During the 2004–2005 school year, seniors interned at the local chamber of commerce, the Dover Township prosecutor's office, the Ocean County courthouse, physical therapy offices, pediatricians' offices, Community Memorial Hospital's surgical wing, and an environmental concerns group. As the professional-student relationship develops, the professional takes on the role of teacher and the student often becomes more deeply involved in the business of the day than originally planned. Students have observed surgeries, investigated water pipelines, and sat in on town meetings. Placements may lead to summer employment or job opportunities after college.

Near the end of the placement, students synthesize their job-shadowing experiences and their research into a paper explaining a particular aspect of their placement, which they defend to a teacher or administrator. One young woman shadowed the owner of a preschool and reported on the leadership qualities necessary for this position, citing examples of dealing with auditors, state investigators, disgruntled teachers, and complaining parents. Another senior researched water pollution at a local chemical plant during the 1980s and 1990s, and then reported on the status of present cleanup efforts. She related the plant's situation to the problems currently faced by the environmental group she was shadowing.

By shadowing professionals, students learn about the pitfalls and challenges of the business world before they have to be responsible in that world. They learn to manage their time and interact with professionals outside a school setting. In addition to receiving intellectual stimulation, students develop social and practical know-how. The shadowing program dovetails with recommendations by the National Commission on the High School Senior Year (2001), which advocate giving students strong connections to adults—both inside and outside school—who can help them explore options for school, postsecondary education, and work. One student
wrote in her final paper,

I am very privileged to be able to experience this class. In the past few weeks, I have gained more knowledge about the accounting and financing field than I ever imagined. I have been able to work with professionals who enjoy spending time with me, an eager student.

**Whetting Intellectual Appetites**

To address the intellectual needs of senior students, our science coordinator, John Navarra, developed an independent study curriculum for astronomy and electronics, two subjects for which no room exists in the regular schedule. He created a syllabus that includes a course outline, interactive Web sites, research topics, and textbook references. Astronomy students have designed solar systems in the hallways and taught small groups of students in other classes. The electronics program involves experimentation and construction of electronic models using manipulatives. The school has recently added independent study courses in computer science, accounting, and Spanish.

The flex period in the middle of the day allows students extra time to work on their independent studies, with the teacher as coach. The physics lab and the library are available for experimentation and research. Because this program is offered at both the honors and college prep levels, it provides an opportunity for any senior student to work at his or her own pace. If a student discovers a particularly inviting topic that was not stressed in the original outline, the teacher will encourage further study on that topic in lieu of another. Such freedom whets the appetites of future research scientists.

**Letting Students Teach**

Monsignor Donovan provides a nurturing school environment with caring, helpful relationships among teachers and students. To permit these relationships to flourish and to encourage the teaching instinct in many seniors, we developed a teaching assistant program. Faculty members have remarked on how valuable their student assistants are. “I don't know how I managed to serve all of my students before,” exclaimed Laurie Brown, an Algebra 2 teacher. Her assistant provides struggling students with individualized help, teaches makeup lessons to students who were absent, and corrects quizzes.

Some teaching assistants work in the kindergartens; others work in the chemistry and biology labs, setting up equipment for the teachers and helping 9th and 10th graders understand lab procedures. In the lower-grades history and English classes, assistants help students assemble research papers. One enthusiastic senior put a lot of energy into helping the Latin teacher bolster students' appreciation of Latin roots and translations. The teaching experience strengthened his own love of world languages and cemented his desire to study languages in college.

Research suggests that people learn best and retain the most information by teaching others. In addition to retaining content, these teaching assistants are learning to discern the elements of a successful classroom environment while recognizing the challenges of teaching students
with varying academic abilities and the difficulty of moving curriculum along without leaving anyone behind.

**Strengthening the Body**

We found that senior restlessness affected even physical exercise at Monsignor Donovan: Many senior girls had become resistant to participating in required team sports. In addition, the increased student population was outgrowing the gym. Physical education teacher Kim Sandomierski created a new option called Women's Fitness. Every day, approximately 50 senior girls jog over to Toms River Fitness, a large fitness center in a nearby shopping mall, for a one-hour workout. They have a choice of aerobics classes, swimming, weight training, or yoga. Women's Fitness has been so successful that we have added a Muscle and Fitness class for young men this year. As seniors move on to college and independent responsibilities, the fitness routines they learned here will serve them well.

**Nurturing the Spirit**

**Kairos Retreats**

As a Catholic school, we place spiritual development at the core of our philosophy. Several times a year, we take a group of 30–40 seniors on a three-day Kairos retreat (from the Greek word *kairos*, meaning “time with God”) with faculty members and campus minister Mary Benner. Most of our seniors take part in a Kairos retreat, and much time and preparation go into planning each one. Benner identifies capable students to be retreat leaders. Leaders prepare presentations describing difficult times in their lives and discussing how their faith helped them cope. They also facilitate small-group discussions. As participants learn to appreciate and understand one another, a bond forms. The retreat may be the first time in four years that certain students interact with one another. Because a certain level of maturity is necessary to participate fully and honestly at a Kairos retreat, only seniors attend. The retreat may be the first time some students are away from their families for an extended time. Students are responsible for making up any classwork they miss, and they must deal with the strong emotional response that Kairos elicits. A Kairos retreat provides a spiritual reference point for students as they move into adulthood. Benner notes that students “make a connection with themselves, the community, and God. Compassion opens them to view the world differently.”

Opening avenues to spirituality need not be restricted to parochial schools. According to Nel Noddings,

> Even those of us who have rejected institutional religion still have that longing. If spirituality is removed entirely from schooling, if it becomes a topic that is more or less forbidden in everyday conversation, then that longing becomes repressed until people go out and buy books about spirituality. (Halford, 1998–1999, p. 31)

An offshoot of the Kairos retreat is the three-day Urban Challenge retreat at the Romero Center in Camden, New Jersey. Last spring, 20 seniors and two teachers immersed themselves in the
impoverished neighborhoods of Camden and Philadelphia. They purchased food with food stamps and cooked meals to serve to homeless people. Students were exposed to the realities of poverty, racism, and class differences that divide people, and they recognized structures in society that cause poverty.

Aims of Education

If you complain of neglect of education in sons, what shall I say with regard to daughters, who every day experience the want of it? . . . If we mean to have heroes, statesmen, and philosophers, we should have learned women.

—Abigail Adams

Community Service

All students at Monsignor Donovan complete a certain number of service hours before they graduate. Seniors who enroll in the Christian Service course take this responsibility further by planning service activities for the rest of the school. In Christian Service classes, senior students research, observe, and put into place service projects for the student body. They also reflect on what service to one another really means and come to understand the subtle differences between charity work and social justice, which are both necessary components of the coursework.

With direction from our Christian Service teacher Deacon Frank Babuschak and community service coordinator Suzan Fichtner, seniors have sponsored soup kitchens, food banks, and fund-raising for a myriad of charities. They have helped build houses through Habitat for Humanity. Their participation in the Big Brothers Big Sisters program for elementary students in a low-income school system has become a model in the county and resulted in Monsignor Donovan students training students in other schools. Students have donated prom dresses and accessories to disadvantaged teenagers and walked in the Relay for Life cancer walk.

Through the Innocent Child Project, a program that provides school supplies to children in Iraq, our students helped send 900 boxes of school supplies to two Iraqi schools. This program was nominated as a semifinalist in the Make a Difference contest sponsored by Channel One News.

These service projects have strengthened our seniors' social and moral consciences, ensuring that they will be productive citizens in the future. Community service and retreat opportunities are some students' most memorable high school experiences. Graduates return to tell us that they are creating chapters of Habitat for Humanity in their colleges, or that they have generated interest in the Kairos retreat model. Alumni who learned the value of social justice at Monsignor Donovan have established scholarships for students who demonstrate a commitment to community service.

The creative learning opportunities offered to seniors at Monsignor Donovan have planted in them seeds of independence, life skills, and enthusiasm for social justice. As they move on to a less personal, more secular world, their minds, bodies, and spirits will bloom.
References


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