

SENIOR PROJECT OVERVIEW

Santa Susana High School

Purpose

High school seniors are faced with the challenge of transitioning from the world of high school to the adult post-secondary world – whether that is further education or the workforce. One important aspect of a senior's education must therefore be to focus on making that transition as smooth as possible. Senior Project is designed to do just that.

Senior Project is a challenging, rigorous and relevant process in which senior students blend real-world application with traditional learning, and in which students embark on an in-depth topic that is of special interest to them. It is designed to allow students to explore, pursue, grow, and communicate their personal interests while showcasing abilities and effort that are considered attributes in the adult workforce.

The recent National Governors Association (NGA) position paper recommends that every state should adopt performance-based assessments. They go on to say:

“High school graduates must be able to design and carry out significant research projects, including selecting researchable topics; collecting, analyzing and interpreting appropriate data; and communicating the results clearly and effectively. These skills should be taught and assessed, but they cannot be measured on a large-scale, on demand assessment. Instead, every student should be required to carry out a significant research project, such as a capstone Senior Project. The project should give each student an opportunity to explore in depth an important topic of genuine interest and to apply academic knowledge learned over a period of time to a meaningful problem in an academic discipline, the community, or a career or technical area....Local school districts should provide the leadership and support necessary to accomplish this, within broad state guidelines....”

A *Senior Project Admissions Survey* (2001) was administered to fifty college and university admissions representatives to determine the extent to which Senior Project participation was used in the college admissions process. The survey indicated that completion of a Senior Project would, in fact, have an effect on admission if students mentioned that they had done a Senior Project in college admissions essays, college interviews or if it was listed on their transcripts. This was especially true of the admissions process of those schools designated as “selective” or “highly selective” schools.

Given national discussion about increasing graduation requirements and the importance of students connecting high school leading to the world of work *and* postsecondary education, the inclusion of Senior Project as a part of a rigorous and comprehensive high school education is essential.

Project Overview

Senior Project is composed of four parts (“The Four P’s”): Paper, Product, Portfolio, and Presentation. Each twelfth grade student completes a comprehensive research paper, creates a product related to the paper, and compiles a portfolio documenting the process and skills used to carry out the project. Finally, each student makes a presentation on their findings before a community review panel.

The four components of a Senior Project all reflect quality student work. The Senior Project must tie in with a major employment industry, adding an important school-to-career component that prompts the student to think beyond the four walls of the classroom. The process begins with research to provide a solid foundation of knowledge from which to conduct the project. Students select an adult mentor, an expert in their area of interest, who agrees to assist them with their project. A minimum of twenty hours of independent fieldwork is conducted to complete the product. A portfolio showcases the connection between the paper and fieldwork. Included in the

portfolio are the research paper, a letter of introduction, a resume, letters of recommendation, a log detailing the student's fieldwork, an evaluation by the mentor and a letter of reflection by the student. A seven to ten minute presentation by the senior allows the student the opportunity to communicate and/or demonstrate the finished product.

Upon completion of the Senior Project each student will have gained important research and writing skills, valuable communication skills, and will leave high school with a comprehensive portfolio to present to any college and employer. Most importantly, perhaps, is the confidence that each student gains in knowing that they have been stretched beyond their comfort zones, proving to themselves and to the world what they are able to accomplish. Senior Project is one of the most important and meaningful educational experiences a senior will have.

Santa Susana High School and Senior Project

The "School & Academy" structure of Santa Susana High School is designed to provide an education that each student finds meaningful and relevant to his or her own life and future. Every Santa Susana High School student chooses to identify with one of ten "Academies" within three "Schools" of study. Within the Schools of *Academics*, *The Arts*, and *Information Technology*, are ten different academies, offering programs which integrate core academic content with career technical skills. In order to specialize in one or more of the school's areas of emphasis, each SSHS student follows a customized, four-year course of study. An essential component of their chosen course of study is the real-world application of the skills they have learned and the knowledge they have gained in school. For Santa Susana students, Senior Project is the culminating learning experience in this sequence of courses, giving them the opportunity to think critically, to apply learned skills in a manner relevant to their lives, and to ease their transition into the postsecondary world.

The Senior Project process affects all members of the SSHS school community. Teachers and staff at Santa Susana act as project advisors, mentors, panelists, and resource personnel. In addition to the twelfth graders, students in grades nine through eleven also benefit from Senior Projects, by participating in various projects, volunteering as student escorts, and serving on the presentation panels. Through this process, underclass students learn what a successful Senior Project looks like and how it can benefit all components of the community.

Community and business members are involved in Senior Projects from start to finish by providing mentorships, internships, facilities, and materials. Their expertise brings relevance to the seniors' classroom experience and is interwoven throughout the students' projects. Students learn professionalism and reliability through their interactions with their mentors and are introduced to work force ethics and professional attitudes.

Santa Susana High School believes that all high school graduates need a strong foundation of the basic skills needed to transition from high school into the postsecondary world. State assessments drive and underscore that purpose. We further believe that the same graduates should also be able to independently demonstrate the application of those skills within the context of the real world, while also applying untested skills such as time management, communication, human interaction and responsibility. Though high stakes tests are one step on the pathway to a diploma, we also believe that each graduating senior must complete a final skill application that is rigorous and meaningful before their time in high school diploma is completed.

Senior Project is an event that students view as the capstone of what they have gained at Santa Susana in relation to what they will need to know in the "real world." Representative of the rigorous academic standards of the school, and the relevancy necessary to maximize learning, Senior Project is an important piece of the education Santa Susana High School students receive.