

Results of a pilot test of a Senior Project certification process
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Senior Project is a culminating assessment for 12th graders consisting of a research paper on an approved topic of student choice, a related product and portfolio, and a presentation before community members. Senior Project (SP) attempts to address some of the current concerns about the degree to which high school prepares students for post-graduation life (Boyer, 1985; Sizer, 1992; Aness & Darling-Hammond, 1993; National Commission on the High School Senior Year, 2001). As SP implementation has spread, though, its definition has become blurred (Egelson, Robertson, & Smith, 2002; Taafe, 2001), and it has become increasingly important to ensure that programs are being implemented faithfully. The researchers developed a certification process that employs a 24-item “Yes Test.” The researchers pilot tested the process in four eastern high schools with established SP programs. Staff made site visits to each school and conducted full-day process trial runs. Each school was then assigned to a staff member who assumed responsibility for analyzing data and writing the report. Data came from stakeholder (SP coordinator(s), principal, faculty, and randomly selected 12th graders) interviews; the selected students’ portfolios and papers; and the SP student handbook and related SP materials. The pilot test produced two kinds of results: school results (certified or not and why) and process results (how well it worked and what changes were needed). No school met all 24 certification requirements. The process results confirmed that the process was fundamentally sound but needed several changes. Implications include: certification can establish a minimum standard for programs that can raise the level of SP nationally and enrich the experience of the students involved; can make a student’s participation an important consideration in college admissions or job applications; and can help direct state rewards, such as NC’s awards program for best Senior Project programs, to deserving schools.

References

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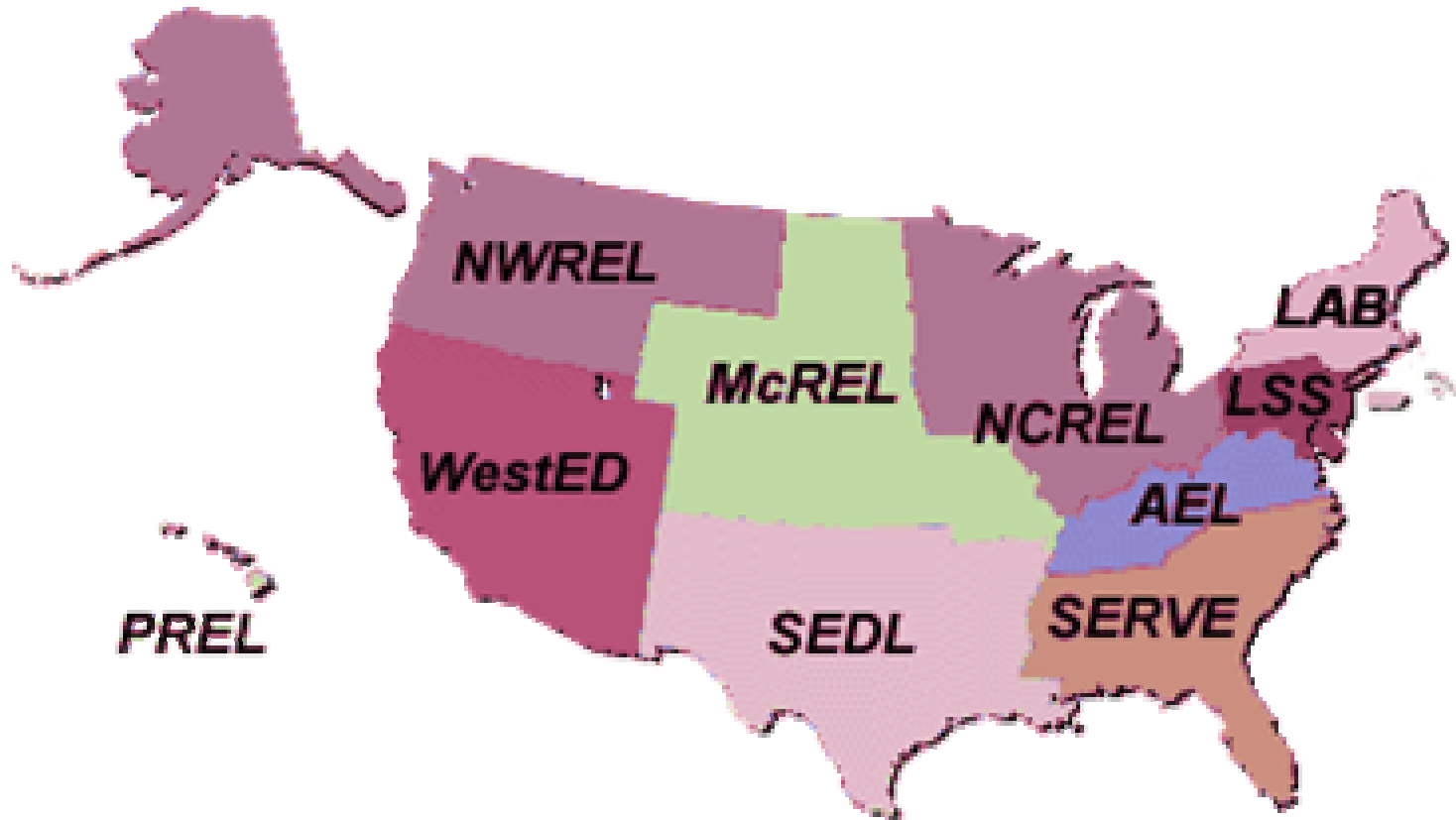
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REL Network





What is Senior Project?

- Writing an eight to ten page research paper on an approved topic of student choice
- Developing a product related to the paper that requires a minimum of 15 hours of work
- Creating a portfolio that reflects the Senior Project process
- Delivering a presentation to a panel of community and faculty members



What is Senior Project?

- Students are assessed on each component using a common rubric.
- The program can be implemented in a senior English class, in combination with several classes, as a stand-alone class, or as an independent student activity.
- Faculty and community members advise and direct students.



Senior Project Survey of College Admissions Officers, 2001

- Senior Project was little known to survey participants
- “Highly selective” and “very selective” schools are most likely to recognize the term Senior Project
- Admissions officers may not have time to consider a non-standardized program such as Senior Project
- Admissions officers would like to receive a written program description from Senior Project schools
- Senior Project college applicants may not recognize that the program is special
- Participants’ interest in Senior Project varies with the selectivity levels of their colleges



Survey of North Carolina High Schools, 2002

- Nearly half of all the state's high schools are either implementing Senior Project (32%) or considering implementation (14%).
- Self reported Senior Project schools require:
 - One Component: 6% (N=6)
 - Two Components: 2% (N=2)
 - Three Components: 19% (N=20)
 - Four Components: 57% (N=59)
 - More Than Four Components: 13% (N=14)
 - No Answer: 3% (N=3)



Senior Project Certification

- 24-item “Yes Test”
- Interview and data gathering protocols
- Site visit for data collection
- Certification report
- Piloted at 4 east coast high schools



Data Sources

- Interview with the Senior Project coordinator(s)
- Interview with the principal
- Focus group interview with 6 to 8 faculty members who are actively involved in Senior Project
- Focus group interviews with 15 randomly selected 12th grade students
- The selected students' Senior Project portfolios
- Copies of the Senior Project student handbook, selected students' research papers, faculty Senior Project handbook, memos, and newspaper clippings, and
- The National Center for Education Statistics website and the respective state departments of education websites (for general school background information)



School Results

- No school met all of the certification requirements.
- The requirements most commonly not met were numbers 7, 13, 22, and 24.



Process Results

- Need a detailed pre-certification school self-evaluation form
- Programs must be established for at least two years prior
- Need minimum requirements for the paper and portfolio
- Must receive a “Yes” on all 24 criteria to be certified
- Be specific about how the school can improve failed areas
- A school may “bank” its Yeses for up to one year
- Certification is good for four years
- A site visit is required
- The process may satisfactorily be done by one person
- The certification process requires three staff days