

THE ROLE OF HIGH SCHOOL SENIOR THESIS ON THE SELF-EFFICACY OF HIGH  
SCHOOL GRADUATES

A CAPSTONE PROJECT SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE  
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### **Abstract**

The purpose of this work is to examine the impact and potential future implementation of “Senior Thesis” as a high school graduation requirement, specifically examining whether this experience builds self-efficacy for a diverse range of 12th grade students. Educators seek impactful, culminating, projects that develop knowledge and skills necessary to succeed in higher education and the workforce. Existing peer-reviewed literature on rigorous graduation requirements neglect to examine the potential of this program, which has a purposeful combination of components that may be beneficial and accessible to a wide range of students. I address this issue to better enable policymakers to understand how Senior Thesis develops confidence and self-efficacy, for graduates who go on to a prestigious university, community college, or straight into the workforce. Based on my experience teaching Senior Thesis, I created a survey and collected data from 43 participants who completed this project, then went on to various levels of higher education and employment. Responses to the survey and follow-up questions, show that participants overwhelmingly felt that Senior Thesis benefited their self-efficacy in both academic and professional endeavors. These findings offer educators a broader understanding of senior project options by introducing a focus on Senior Thesis, highlights the benefits of this requirement for diverse learners, and the benefits it may provide high school graduates if implemented in more schools.

## The Role of High School Senior Thesis on the Self-Efficacy of High School Graduates

Educators are constantly searching for ways to make students more motivated, confident, and ready for the next step in their education. Finding methods and programs to help high school students successfully transition into college or into careers, is a matter of much research, countless books, and endless seminars. In this study, I examine the impact of “Senior Thesis,” on the self-efficacy of high school graduates, and consider how this program might be implemented in more schools. With this work, I examine how Senior Thesis benefits high school seniors, and what skills students develop and utilize while completing this graduation project. In order to address both impact and implementation, I created a survey and collected data from students who have completed Senior Thesis, and wrote a Teacher’s Guide (along with other curriculum artifacts) for reference for those who are curious about this senior project.

Though high school “capstone” graduation projects gained popularity in American high schools around the 2010s, the majority of peer-reviewed research on the effectiveness and implementation of these capstone experiences focus on only a few, well-known models. Capstone projects “are designed to prepare students for college and the workforce” and are known as being an opportunity for a student to show off all the knowledge and capability they have gained through years of education (Kannapel, 2012). “During capstone experiences, students go through an extended process of inquiry in response to a complex question, problem, or challenge” (Buzzetto-More, 2013) which helps them be prepared for situations and projects that they will face in higher education and in the workforce. Capstone projects originated in higher education, as a way for students to be better prepared to enter their fields after their studies, by completing a project that “emphasized solving real-world, open-ended” issues (Kannapel, 2012). A web-based search for research on high school “Senior Thesis” produced

numerous results for research on thesis projects in higher education, but minimal information and virtually no research on the effects of this project in high schools by high school seniors. Senior Thesis is a common graduation requirement in Classical Christian schools, and there are numerous blog entries and essays in school publications about the benefits and attributes of Senior Thesis, but no peer-reviewed studies. By conducting this study on the impact and implementation of Senior Thesis, which encompasses research, writing, and presentations, I hope to provide a modest contribution to help fill the gap in current research, and to shed light on a version of the “capstone” that may be useful, effective, and impactful to a wide variety of high school seniors, regardless of what their plans are after high school .

### ***What is a Senior Thesis?***

Senior Thesis is a graduation requirement at some high schools, requiring students to research a topic they are passionate about for about eight months, present on the topic to several different audiences in two formal and several informal settings, write a research paper, give a memorized, 20-minute presentation, then defend the thesis to a panel of judges for another 20 minutes of “Q and A.” This behemoth graduation project not only polishes students’ research and presentation skills, it prepares them for many challenges in college and in their future careers where they will have to persuade different audiences of their point of view with solid evidence and winsome rhetorical skills. Furthermore, successfully completing this comprehensive, culminating assignment shows the student that they are exceptionally capable and can handle very difficult tasks. The pride, awe, and often surprise that students often express upon the completion of Senior Thesis is incredible. Students who have never excelled in the classroom become convinced that they are “good at school” after dressing professionally, then presenting and defending their ideas to a panel of judges. Because presentation skills are such a focus of this

project, they are practiced and refined for students whether the individual has had years of public speaking practice or has managed to avoid presentations throughout high school. Importantly, in order for all students to be able to experience the great feeling of accomplishment that comes from completing this graduation project, the teacher must “set the student up for success” so that this experience is positive and the student has the support to not only complete the assignment but feel proud of their work.

Senior Thesis is a common graduation requirement at Classical Christian schools, but is not commonly required at other types of schools. The students research a (at least somewhat) controversial topic of their choice for about eight months. The topic must have multiple sides or perspectives, even if it is not commonly considered to be “controversial.” For example, “The Benefits of Music Therapy” or “Korean Natural Farming Methods” may not be a frequent topic of hot debate, but they are not “mainstream” or commonly accepted ideas, and differ from “common” methods, so the student can share reasons to examine these issues from certain perspectives, which fresh and new to the audience.

The project takes the greater part of senior year to complete. First, students choose their topic within the first few weeks of school. Next, they write and present an “Original Oratory” speech at a local Speech and Debate tournament (which is a 5 page/10 minute, passionate speech), and complete an annotated bibliography by around Thanksgiving. In second quarter of the school year, students write a 20-page research paper which is well supported. Finally, in the third quarter, students use all the knowledge they have gained in the first six months of the school year to write a 10-page presentation, which they memorize in the fourth quarter, then present to a panel of judges. After presenting their thesis, they defend it to the panel of judges and the community members in the audience. This is their last, great achievement before

graduation. Their presentations are recorded and posted by the school (YouTube, streamed on Facebook, VIMEO, etc.) so that audience members who are not in attendance can still watch the presentation, and for future classes to learn from. This is a rigorous graduation requirement that helps high school seniors hone many skills (academic and “soft skills”) and is the culminating achievement of their K-12th grade education (Gilley, 2019). This project is not only a stepping stone toward college-level research and theses, the rhetorical focus helps students become more comfortable with public speaking, supporting their ideas with evidence, responding well to difficult questions, and winning over diverse audiences, which are helpful skills in the business world.

***What does confidence and self-efficacy look like in a high school senior?***

High school seniors with a strong sense of self-confidence and self-efficacy when leaving high school for college will be excited and full of anticipation. They will be eager to meet new friends, teachers and classmates, join clubs, and buy their school supplies. They will feel that they are up for a challenge or an adventure, but that they are prepared and have the abilities or tools they need to succeed in college. They will also feel that they have support and people who not only care about them but believe in their academic abilities (Zimmerman, 2000). Confident high school graduates who are working or starting work, feel “ambitious” and read to “start real life” when their self-efficacy is strong. “Self-efficacy reflects confidence in the ability to exert control over one's own motivation, behavior, and social environment” (Bandura, 2012). Students who have high self-efficacy view projects and challenges as opportunities, take responsibility for their work, and feel confident about their ability to take on large projects. These students are confident in their abilities and their level of self-control. In fact, “self-efficacy refers to an individual's belief in his or her capacity to execute behaviors necessary to produce specific

performance attainments” (Bandura, 2012). Because the Senior Thesis experience has given them ample opportunity to practice useful, higher-level, academic skills, and to succeed in the presentation of a large, culminating project, high school graduates who have presented and defended a thesis will strongly believe that they have the understanding and capability to achieve their academic goals in college and perform difficult tasks at work. In fact, 11 out of 43 participants in this study specifically shared in their open-ended survey questions that they felt confident taking on any challenge after completing Senior Thesis. Participant #1 shared “I felt much more competent and accomplished than most high school graduates I know at my university. It gives me the confidence to approach difficult obstacles in my schooling.” Participant #3 went further than only academic self-efficacy by sharing “I felt that knowing that Senior Thesis was behind me, I could tackle anything thrown my way.”

***How are high school culminating projects like thesis, capstone, or portfolios similar and how are they different?***

Many high school programs have a rigorous, culminating, final project that is a graduation requirement. These “capstone” projects have been part of American high school education since the 1990s, but there have not been many peer-reviewed studies on the “implementation and impact of these courses” (Kannapel, 2012). The International Baccalaureate Programme (IB) is a two-year diploma program for juniors and seniors in high school. Students take IB exams in five core subjects and focus on becoming global citizens. The IB program is recognized as perhaps the “most rigorous curriculum available in secondary education” (*International Baccalaureate*). Students in the IB program must complete a 4,000 word extended essay which they work on with an advisor over 14 months. Although there is no

oral defense of the paper, IB students write and present oral presentations over the course of their senior year (*International Baccalaureate Program vs. AP Capstone*).

The Advanced Placement (AP) Capstone Program is offered by the College Board. AP courses give students both high school and college credit if they can pass AP exams for their courses. The AP Capstone Program is recognized as rigorous; high school seniors must complete a Seminar class where they submit a research paper, an argument, a multimedia presentation, and a defense, to be scored by the College Board (*International Baccalaureate Program vs. AP Capstone*). Although both programs tout many benefits to students who complete the programs, both the IB and AP programs are considered to be rigorous programs, prestigious, and “higher level” tracks that prepare students for college. “AP” literally stands for “Advanced Placement,” and IB is recognized as a “high quality international education program” ([IBO.org](http://IBO.org)). Neither of these graduation requirements would be part of a “general education” track in high school. Though both programs are impressive and have data to support their benefits, neither is really for all students, even if the programs make some adjustments for learning differences.

Performing and visual arts programs often have culminating graduation requirements called a “Senior Showcase” or “Senior Portfolio.” Students work with advisors and mentors for the entirety of their senior year to complete and present work that represents the sum of their skills, abilities, and imagination. Artists must consider how their art can contribute in a meaningful way to the existing world of visual or performing art. The work is usually presented to the public, instructors, and to college admissions officers. These projects are a reflection of a graduate’s total abilities in their chosen form of art or performance. These portfolios for the arts are fairly specialized for performing or visual artists. They represent the artist’s growth and capabilities, and are often judged or viewed by the public or by a panel of judges. They are

performance or works based and do not have the same academic reading and writing/ research and presentation aspects that the other graduation projects mentioned here do.

The Senior Thesis is similar to a “Capstone Project, Senior Portfolio/Showcase” or “Senior Project” in that all of these are graduation requirements that require the prolonged and focused attention of the student over the majority of their senior year (perhaps the process even starts in 11th grade), with the support and guidance of an advisor or mentor. These are final assignments that represent the cumulative capabilities of the student. They are often presented to multiple audiences, and are judged by teachers, experts, and often by the public. They require a demonstration of expertise from the student and offer the student the opportunity to practice many skills at a higher level than they have had to in prior high school assignments. Through this project or presentation experience, students will generally do deep research into a topic they may continue to examine in college and in their career, write and present at the college level, learn to work closely with an academic advisor, network, and gain a great deal of experience presenting their ideas to academic audiences and the community. A successful experience with any of these rigorous graduation requirements will lead to high feelings of self-efficacy (Skeldon, 2012).

Senior Thesis is similar to other senior projects “that mirror similar projects in higher education, in which seniors develop a culminating, thesis-like project that applies the knowledge gained throughout their schooling to a topic of interest to the student” (Kannapel, 2012).

Two key differences between Senior Thesis and many other capstone experiences is that though it is a rigorous final project, it can be completed successfully by students who are not on a “college predatory” track in high school, and the defense of the thesis provides practice of skills that are immediately useful in job hunts, college interviews, and on the job. Senior Thesis

can provide an incredible boost in self-efficacy to students regardless of where they are headed; to work, to an internship, to community college, or to a university.

***What skills involved in presenting and defending a senior thesis develop confidence or self-efficacy?***

Though the scope of a high school senior thesis project may seem large and intimidating to many students, the course or program should be broken down into manageable chunks, with ongoing instruction, regularly spaced due dates, and regular meetings with both the thesis instructor and an advisor or mentor, so that the process builds self-efficacy. With these supports in place, the student is guided through the process in a way that makes Senior Thesis less daunting and sets a student up for success. The instructor helps the student with time management and understanding each step of the process. The mentor or advisor works closely with the student to refine ideas, improve organization, find sources, and examine ideas/support for arguments. Working closely with teachers, mentors and advisors is an important skill for both undergraduate and graduate students and is an important part of the thesis experience. Having the opportunity to learn how to work with adults in an academic way is a boon for high school students, who often have not yet developed these types of relationships. Matt Zitello, Director of Hawaii Technology Academy's Oahu campus (HTA), stresses that he rethought HTA's program to focus on the "4 Cs of 21st Century Teaching" because he had been told by many of their community partners that many high school graduates lack the ability to collaborate and/or speak with adults. This ability is vital for students to be able to bring their ideas into the real world (M. Zitello, personal communication October 3, 2021).

Participant 14 shared "Being able to effectively defend my thesis from a panel of judges made me feel more secure in my professionalism." Participant 9 responded "I feel like I am

definitely more confident in the way I speak to authority even when I am nervous and am eloquent when making professional correspondence.” And Participant 27 stated “I am able to more confidently and effectively communicate to superiors and colleges. Speaking in front of a crowd has become second nature and has improved my comfort in front of a crowd.” Through the Senior Thesis project, a twelfth grader practices time management; working with multiple teachers or experts on a project, upper-level research, writing and presenting, public-speaking, and discussing and defending their ideas with the community. They must also deeply consider the relevance of an issue in relation to themselves and the world. Practicing these soft skills along with rhetorical appeals (with support and direction) builds confidence. The experience and success with Senior Thesis provides high school graduates with a useful and positive frame of reference when the student goes to college and works on a large research project, written assignment, or presentation. They have now had experience corresponding and sharing ideas with professionals and experts via Zoom, via email, and depending on when they completed their thesis, in person. These students have completed a Senior Thesis, so they feel prepared to tackle the college-level assignment and professional projects that come their way (Brandenburg, 2009; Carolan, 2008; Gilley, 2019; Guttenberg, 1996; Le et al., 2005; Morrison, 2021; Pennacchia, 2010; Segar, 2021; Summers, 1989; Yasuda, 2017).

### **Review of Related Literature**

Existing literature on rigorous graduation requirements like Senior Theses include Capstone Projects, Senior Presentations, and Showcases (or Senior Portfolios in visual arts). These types of senior projects are similar to the Senior Thesis in that they show mastery in a subject and are the focus of the student’s work for most of their senior year or longer. Each culminating project or presentation represents the cumulative learning and experiences of a 12th

grade student, which is presented publicly and is judged by a panel of teachers and experts.

Many studies have found benefits from rigorous graduation requirements, but existing studies examine “advanced” or “college track” students in challenging programs. There does not seem to be existing, peer-reviewed research on Senior Thesis presentations specifically, so I look forward to adding my findings to the existing research on the broader collection of how senior projects or portfolios affect the confidence and self-efficacy of high school seniors. Because Senior Thesis has a rhetorical focus, it does have some key differences from the advanced placement versions of capstone projects and I believe it could be of value to demographics of students who are not offered the opportunity to complete a capstone at this time.

One possible reason for the lack of peer-reviewed papers on the Senior Thesis is that it is a tradition in schools that subscribe to a perennialist educational philosophy, which has not been widely popular in the United States for some time. Perennialist theory focuses on the facts and ideas that transcend time. In practice in the United States, perennialists tend to be extremely Eurocentric, focusing on teaching the “classics” of Western Civilization; Greek and European philosophy; and rhetoric. Research in education (and trends in education) since 2000 has trended toward progressive education, focusing more and more on child development, student-led and student-centered classrooms, learning differences, STEM, Project Based Learning, SEL etc. and has moved away from many pedagogies that feel “old fashioned” to contemporary educators. In the Classical Christian Education tradition, there are many passionate educators who have written quite a bit about the Senior Thesis, but these are articles in Classical Christian magazines and blog posts, not peer-reviewed studies. I am not advocating Classical Christian Education in this study, however I hypothesize that there are many beneficial aspects in high school seniors completing a Senior Thesis (which is commonly used in Classical Christian Secondary Schools),

and I hoped to find measurable, positive results in my research. This project is actually incredibly student-centered, as the student chooses a topic they are passionate about and practices presenting their ideas winsomely. The teacher is not providing any ideas, the student develops arguments based on research and their own, personal passion.

My hope was that any positive correlation between completing a Senior Thesis project and positive levels of self-efficacy found in this study could motivate more high schools to look into using this method with their 12th graders. A combination of Universal Design (which is a methodology where lessons are designed in a way that all learners can succeed, instead of being designed so that only some learners will succeed and others will need modifications or accommodations), support from the instructor and advisors, and multiple opportunities to practice each skill being built into the class or project, create a learning environment where the 12th grader is guided to successful completion of an impressive final product which is a tangible success and source of pride. If a school does not use IB or AP programs, then this may be a good option to be considered as a culminating graduating project. Furthermore, schools with IB or AP programs who are looking for options for the students who are not enrolled in these prestigious programs, may want to consider Senior Thesis for the benefits it provides students whether they attend college or not. Students must have appropriate support and guidance to not only complete a rigorous capstone project, but take immense pride in their achievement as well.. Universal Design, the organization and delivery of the course, and successful use of advisors make this experience successful. Teachers/schools should consider these issues before embarking on a senior thesis journey, so that students reap maximum benefits from the experience. When a rigorous graduation requirement is given to high school seniors, it can create high levels of self-efficacy, academic confidence, and improve skills that will be useful at work, in higher

education, and in other areas of life, such as interpersonal communication. For the experience to be effective, students must be given the support, encouragement, tools and structure within which they will be successful. To assign such a culminating assignment without appropriate structure and guidance is harmful to a student and a disservice from the school. Self-efficacy increases with successful completion of the complex, challenging project.

The purpose of this study is to examine how completing a high school Senior Thesis affects high school graduates' feelings of self-efficacy as they leave high school and go to either a job or college, measured by a survey of young adults who have completed Senior Thesis as a high school graduation requirement.

### **My Guiding Hypothesis**

Presenting and defending a Senior Thesis will lead to strong/high/positive feelings of self-efficacy related to both academic and professional abilities in high school graduates.

### **Theories, Policies, and Practical Problems**

Though I aimed to find evidence that supported my guiding hypothesis, I must be clear that implementing a Senior Thesis graduation requirement may seem problematic for many schools. Schools with a large percentage of English Language Learners or students with significant learning differences can still do a Senior Thesis but these students would potentially need significant accommodations. Having the budget for a Senior Thesis teacher can be a major limiting factor for many schools, and having the community relationships or resources to find advisors and experts for all students would be a significant barrier to this type of graduation requirement for schools with large populations and poor community relationships. The logistics of finding a location and time for all seniors to present can also be a challenge for a large school. Having taught Speech and Debate for several years, I am always impressed by the organization

and moxie of the Hawaiian Speech League (HSL), who manages to schedule tournaments for hundreds of students at many schools throughout the year. Learning from the HSL's methods, it is possible to have a small audience and a panel of judges in each speaker/presenter's room, with many rounds of students presenting in one day. With recording/live-streaming of presentations, and some well-run logistics, a school of a graduating class of 300 may be able to provide the Senior Thesis experience for their seniors in a "tournament" style instead of a Classical Christian "symposium" style, and students would still reap the benefits of the experience of presenting and defending their thesis.

This type of assignment may seem like an uncommon "old-fashioned" assignment or one that only an elite school would assign, especially because there are only about 110 Classical Christian schools in America as of 2022, and they tend to proudly be keeping ancient (literally from Ancient Greece), and traditionalist forms of education alive (Lindquist, 2022). "Rhetoric" does not have the same modern ring that "project-based-learning" has, however, it is not difficult to see that Senior Thesis encompasses modern ideas like "voice and choice," and is an opportunity to for a young adult work on something that is extremely relevant to them. I ask my students "What are issues you would be willing to spend time, energy, and money on to solve? What are problems that you'd like to figure out the answers to?" By making sure that individual topics are issues of deep interest to each student, the theses will be relevant to each individual. Often, students continue studying the issue into college! Participant 10 shared "Since I am going into the special education and elementary education field, it allowed me to begin to research some of the difficulties children have. And I was able to have more of an appreciation for it before I started college." Participant 33 responded " I feel equipped as I approach a career in a field of similar topic to my senior thesis." This individual project allows each student to study

their personal topic of interest and reap the benefits of the preparation, research, writing, presenting, and defending of their ideas. It seems that educators have agreed that all students deserve to have a quality education, so rigorous course content and graduation requirements should not be reserved for “elite” schools or programs (“All students deserve high-quality educational opportunities,” 2015). With structure, support and encouragement, all students (who are developmentally able to) can understand and benefit from rigorous content.

### **Assumptions that Underlie Research Questions**

I started my research assuming that there is a great deal of research on what confidence and self-efficacy look like and how they are demonstrated by graduating high school seniors. I assumed that there are adjectives and measurements that already exist to define behaviors that a confident student displays, so that there would be no problem defining them for this study.

I assumed that the skills involved in presenting and defending a senior thesis project are skills that have been shown to develop confidence in high school seniors, and that experience and practiced skill with academic research, public speaking, knowing one's audience, and effective writing are all skills that help an incoming college freshman be successful. (Indeed, literature was found to reflect such connections.) I assumed that this study would be able to show, through the responses to the survey, that the skills required to present and defend a senior thesis project help an incoming college freshman feel confident about their academic abilities, and help young adults feel more capable handling projects at work. Though my primary hypothesis was that Senior Thesis boosts self-efficacy in high school graduates, I also hoped to find evidence that diverse learners who went on to a variety of professional and academic experience found the experience to be useful, helpful, and self-efficacy boosting.

### ***Potential Contributions of the Research***

I hope to provide a modest contribution to this field of research through this study. Educators are perpetually interested in motivating students and helping them feel confident. Students who are eager and feel confident about college will be more likely to apply to college, attend college, and when trying their best and believing they can succeed, they will do better than students who struggle with academic confidence. If a senior thesis project improves high school graduates' self-efficacy, then more schools can benefit from this type of assignment. Furthermore, many schools have different requirements for different groups of students. Only students in AP classes must complete the AP Capstone; only students in the IB program complete the IB graduation requirement. What about students who are not in those programs? Senior Thesis may be a valid and purposeful option for more 12th graders because it develops skills that are useful to graduates whether they go on to a prestigious college, community college, or straight into the workforce. The skills of speaking winsomely to different audiences, writing and speaking persuasively, communicating one's ideas effectively and well, working well with adults in a professional manner, and expertly using valid research to bolster one's claims, will help a young person both academically and professionally. A senior capstone project should not only be considered for "college prep." students. Any evidence found in my study can help the local high school where I worked, and other high schools, see the results of their Senior Thesis program, or a similar, rigorous graduation project.

Because of my hopes for this study, I designed my survey questions carefully to allow participants to share as much of their experience as they wished. With open-ended questions included in the survey, I hoped to glean as much data as possible that might give me insight to the project, and how it might be successfully implemented in more schools for the benefit of more students. The long-term practical implications of the study are to inform policymakers at

high schools about this senior project option and bring about positive change for as many graduating seniors as possible! Practically, I may just be able to bring this project to a few more high schools in Hawaii, but I hope that if it is effective, I can share curriculum on a broader scale to more schools.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

My sample consists of students who completed a Senior Thesis at a local high school in Kailua, Hawaii. My accessible sample are the seniors from the past seven years who were enrolled in the Senior Rhetoric course at the high school where I was teaching, where nine months of the academic school year are devoted to Senior Thesis. The participants are between 18-24 years old, have all graduated high school from a small, private school in Kailua, Hawaii, and have completed their Senior Thesis graduation requirement. The population of the co-ed school from which the participants graduated are mostly white, Asian, and Pacific Islander, whose primary language spoken at home is English, and who are citizens of the United States. Though they were in high school at the time of the course, they are all over 18 now. The participants may resemble populations of other upper-middle-class, suburban, private school graduates in Hawaii, but it is worth noting that this population varies greatly from for example, graduates of a large public school, especially when considering the small class size at the private school and average household income. In Hawaii, public school English classes can have over 30 students in a classroom, whereas at the private school where I was teaching, the maximum was 22 students per classroom and the average was 15. Hawaii's ethnic and cultural makeup differs a great deal from most of the United States, specifically, we have a greater percentage of Pacific Islander and Asian students than most schools on the mainland.

## **Sampling Procedures**

My insights, gained through firsthand experience in the research setting, guided the selection of participants. I chose this site and this sample due to familiarity with and access to the group. My sample was a purposive, criterion sampling, which I believe is representative of the larger population of high school graduates from the local high school where I taught Senior Rhetoric. I hoped for a sample size of 40 out of about 63 students and ended up with a sample size of 43. I wanted to invite all 63 of my prior Senior Rhetoric students to participate in the study, but was only able to contact 56. 76% of those invited, choose to participate in my research. There were no payments or benefit to the participants, though I hope the findings may benefit other high school seniors in the future. There was no foreseeable danger or risk to any participants who choose to participate in the research.

After the initial survey had been conducted, I followed up with eight participants whose responses on the survey results seemed to warrant a further discussion or clarification. The selected survey participants appropriately represented the range of potential participants in the setting because my study is specifically examining the impact of a specific type of culminating project for high school seniors. The students that I have access to (my prior students) have completed this project and could share their range of experiences. Though the sample size is small, I anticipated data saturation as the experience of Senior Thesis was very similar for many. I believe that 43 participants provided an adequate amount of data for analysis. I hope that my findings from this sample of students from a small, private school, can help other high schools with similar programs or who are considering implementing a senior graduation project.

The survey and follow-up/clarifying questions for this study were conducted online (virtually) due to safety concerns regarding COVID-19. Google Forms was used for the online

survey of participants. The platform organized data so it was easily tabulated and able to be organized in many ways for ease of interpretation. Google Forms is a convenient and appropriate way to provide a survey to young adults as it is easy to use and is a platform which is familiar to those who have recently experienced online school due to the COVID-19 pandemic. I am very familiar with Google Forms and have used it with online teaching during the pandemic. After analysis of the questionnaire findings, I followed up with a few students via email in order to gain further understanding of their experiences and their responses on the survey. These students consented to taking the survey, and to responding to clarifying questions if asked. I taught the course “Senior Rhetoric” for several years, where the senior thesis project is the focus of class, and have seen first-hand the effects of this difficult graduation requirement on high school seniors. As the students are all over 18 and the study was conducted virtually, there were no problems with gaining entry to a site. The school where the class was taught is aware of the study and looked forward to viewing the results once the data was compiled.

### ***Trustworthiness Features***

Answers to the survey depended on students’ views and attitudes. They had no reason to be dishonest with their answers. Since there was no risk or reward involved in participation in the study, I hoped to gain clear, direct, and forthright responses to my questions on the questionnaire. Students signed a release giving me permission to use their responses, video of their thesis presentations, and copies of their written work, before participating in the study. My hope was that the results of this study would be similar to studies that have examined similar, large, graduation requirements in high schools, like a senior showcase or capstone project, and that similar results will be found if more studies are done with students around the country who have completed a Senior Thesis graduation requirement. The survey was tested on my peers and

each question was carefully considered before the questionnaire was used. Questions were phrased in academic “layman’s terms” instead of in highly-academic educational research jargon so that my prior students would be able to read and understand the survey with ease.

### **Ethical Considerations**

All participants were over 18, and they were clearly informed that there was no pressure to participate. I am no longer their teacher so cannot influence their grades, or personal, professional, or academic progress. The informed consent was clearly included at the beginning of the questionnaire, and was also sent out to participants via email. The informed consent included participation in the online survey, use of the participant’s written and recorded work from their time in the course, use of participant’s presentation video, and participation in a structured, recorded, Zoom interview if requested.

### **Measures**

**Data Collection Methods.** I used a password-protected drive to collect and store information for this study, and Google Forms to deliver the survey to the participants. Appendices include survey questions, sample Senior Thesis papers, links to videos of presentations and defense of theses, a teacher’s guide to teaching the course, and the Senior Thesis Handbook for students and guardians.

### **Research Design**

**Overall Approach and Rationale for the Study.** After teaching Senior Rhetoric for several years (a class in which Senior Thesis is the main focus), I observed that the benefits of Senior Thesis seemed to be consistent and notable for graduates. In education, educators hope to prepare young people for their futures; we hope to give them valuable tools to help them succeed academically, professionally and personally. In order to see if my observations could be put to

good use and my hypothesis about the Senior Thesis could be verified with data, I designed this study to analyze the experiences of my prior students. Using prior fieldwork to direct my focus, this study used a mixed methods research design, based on personal experience.

**The Researcher's Role.** As their prior teacher, I already have a relationship with the participants and the curriculum that I developed over several years of teaching this project. I am no longer their teacher; there was no expectation of good grades or any kind of compensation for participating in this study. I did not need to go into the school to do this research, as the participants are graduates and all research was conducted virtually. I needed need releases for interviews, surveys, and use of student work from the adult graduates. Material from the class was written, for the most part, by 17 year old students, though they are now 18 or older. I did not anticipate ethical dilemmas or interpersonal issues as a teacher/student relationship and positive rapport from past classes together had already been established.

### **Procedures**

I chose mixed-method, (QUAN-qual). Data was collected once I had permission from the IRB, then stored in a password-protected database. A password-protected drive was used to manage field notes, survey responses, email correspondence, artifacts, video recordings, and other data sources. I sent an email invitation to prior students, inviting them to participate in the study. This email included the informed consent. I conducted surveys and emailed follow-up questions for this study because I wished to first get a good idea of students' perceptions of self-efficacy and how the senior thesis project impacted their impressions of their professional and academic abilities. During the pandemic, and with my prior students spread around the globe in college, in the military, or for work, using virtual means to conduct the survey made the most sense. The survey obtained general results, then follow-up questions helped me understand the

results of the survey further. All graduates from the past seven years who I could get contact information for (56 total) received the invitation to participate, along with the informed consent and link to the questionnaire.

### **Data Analysis Strategies**

Google Forms was used for easy facilitation of a survey to participants, then the interface presented the findings in several ways (charts, by question, summarized, etc.) for me to analyze. Emergent themes became clear through trends in the survey results. Pie charts provided by the Google Forms interface made clear, easy-to-understand figures from the responses to each survey question. The pie charts clearly show the percentage of participants that feel strongly, somewhat, etc. about each question on the survey, and I was actually surprised at how positive the results of the survey were. I was expecting more “somewhat” or “a bit” responses, and got more “very much” and “a great deal” responses than I anticipated. I found Figure 5: “Did you feel more confident or capable (in any way) after completing your Senior Thesis?” to be especially illuminating in regards to my hypothesis, as it showed no “No” responses, 7% “Not Much,” 14% “Somewhat,” 46.5% “Yes,” and 32.6% “Very Much.” This figure shows that 83.1% of participants felt at least somewhat more confident or capable after completing their Senior Thesis. I was heartened to see that number and to read the open responses to questions further down on the survey that elaborated on participants’ responses. I triangulated the survey results with follow-up question responses and explained the results in the survey findings.

### ***Limitations of the Study***

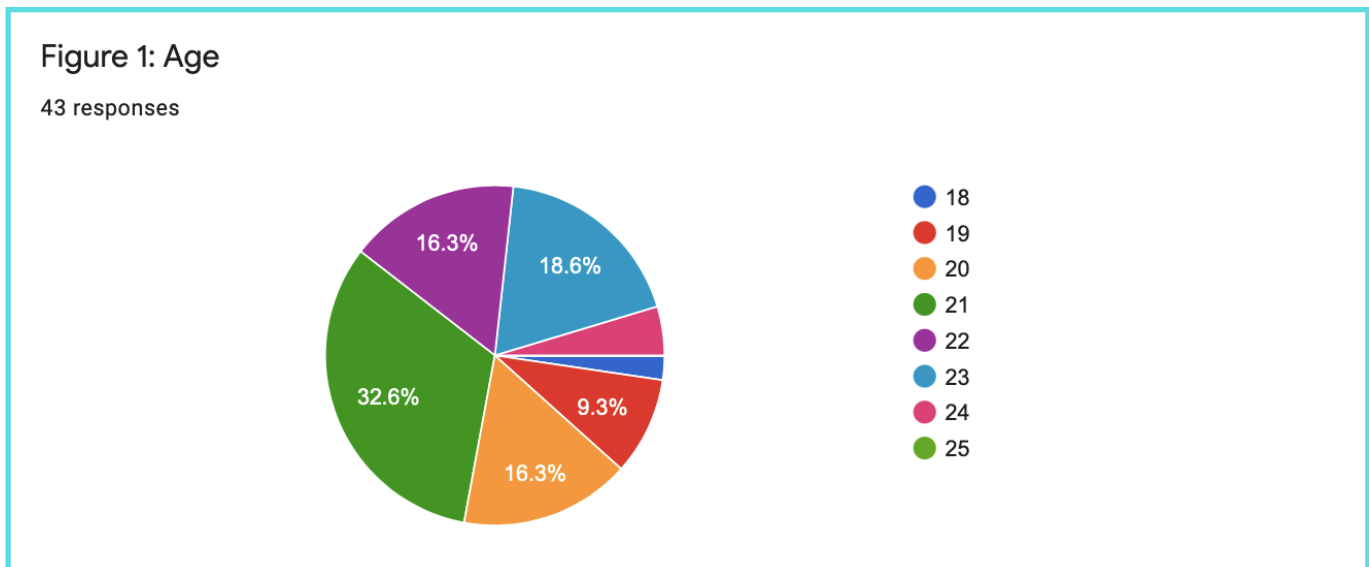
This study is limited by the study group being a small group of students who attended a small, private, school in Kailua, Hawaii, which is a small city on Oahu. Students in different populations, with different resources, may respond differently to this type of assignment. It is

possible that only students with a strong opinion about the Senior Thesis chose to participate in the study, and that participants might not have been fully honest in their survey responses, though a few of the participants shared responses showing that they indeed did not feel strongly about their thesis experience, and they had no pressure to participate, or compensation for answering in a particular manner; these possible limitations are not verifiable.

### Results and Analysis

Figure 1 below summarizes the ages of the participants in the study.

Figure 1: Age

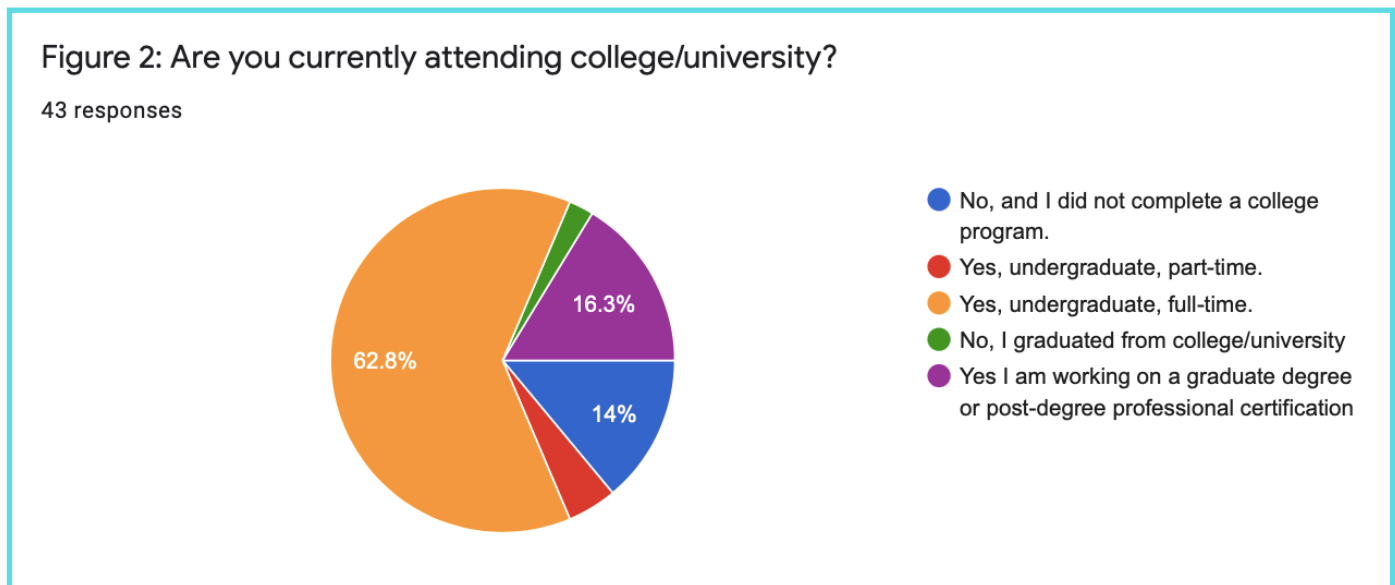


We see that most of the participants are between the ages of 20-23 years old, with 16.2% of respondents being 18, 19, or 24. This breaks down to one, 18 year old respondent, three, 19 year old respondents, and two, 24 year old respondents. The participants in this study are this age because I asked high school graduates from the past seven years who completed Senior Thesis to participate in this study. 12th graders in my class ranged from 16-19 years old at the time they graduated, though the 16-year-old graduate was a singular student. One positive aspect of having

participants with an age range of seven years is that some students are sharing their fresh perspectives as recent high-school graduates, and some participants have finished an undergraduate degree. This gives me a range of experiences to consider, as the participants can reflect on how their experience with Senior Thesis impacted their lives after high school. The majority of respondents are 21 years old, so have had a few years of college or work experience at this point, and can share how Senior Thesis did or did not help them develop skills that they use at school or at work.

Figure 2 below summarizes the enrollment status of the participants in the this study.

Figure 2: Are you currently attending college/university?

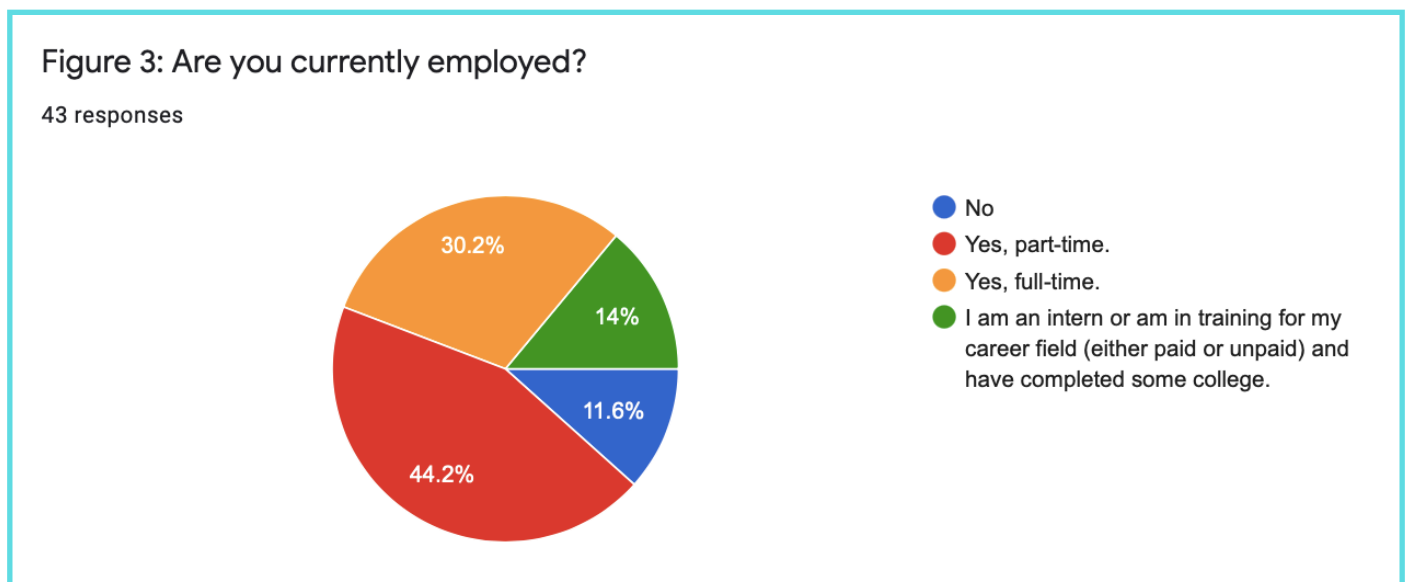


We see that the majority of respondents are full-time, undergraduate students. Only one respondent has graduated and is finished with college, two respondents are part-time, undergraduate students, 14% of respondents did not complete a college program, and 16.3 % of respondents are working on a graduate degree or professional certification. This demographic was expected, as the school from which these students graduated is a small, private school,

which historically sees most graduates going on to college. Six out of 43 respondents did not go to college after high school, and are able to provide important feedback in following questions about how Senior Thesis did or did not benefit students who did not go to college. The seven out of 43 respondents who are in graduate school or in a post-degree professional training/certification program were able to provide important feedback to the questions regarding whether or not skills practiced through Senior Thesis helped them through their undergraduate work and beyond. It is important to notice that the 43 participants in the study are following greatly varied paths in terms of education and employment. Gone are the days where educators push all students to go to college. There are many choices a high school graduate can make which can lead them to a satisfying life after high school. Three of the participants joined the military (two are in college part-time, one did not complete a college program), and two participants have their own “gig-based” businesses (one finished a BA and one did not attend a college program), so the participants reflect a range of post-high school life choices and gives researchers insight to how Senior Thesis is or is not relevant to students who go on to traditional or non-traditional post-high school endeavors.

Figure 3 below summarizes the employment status of the participants in this study.

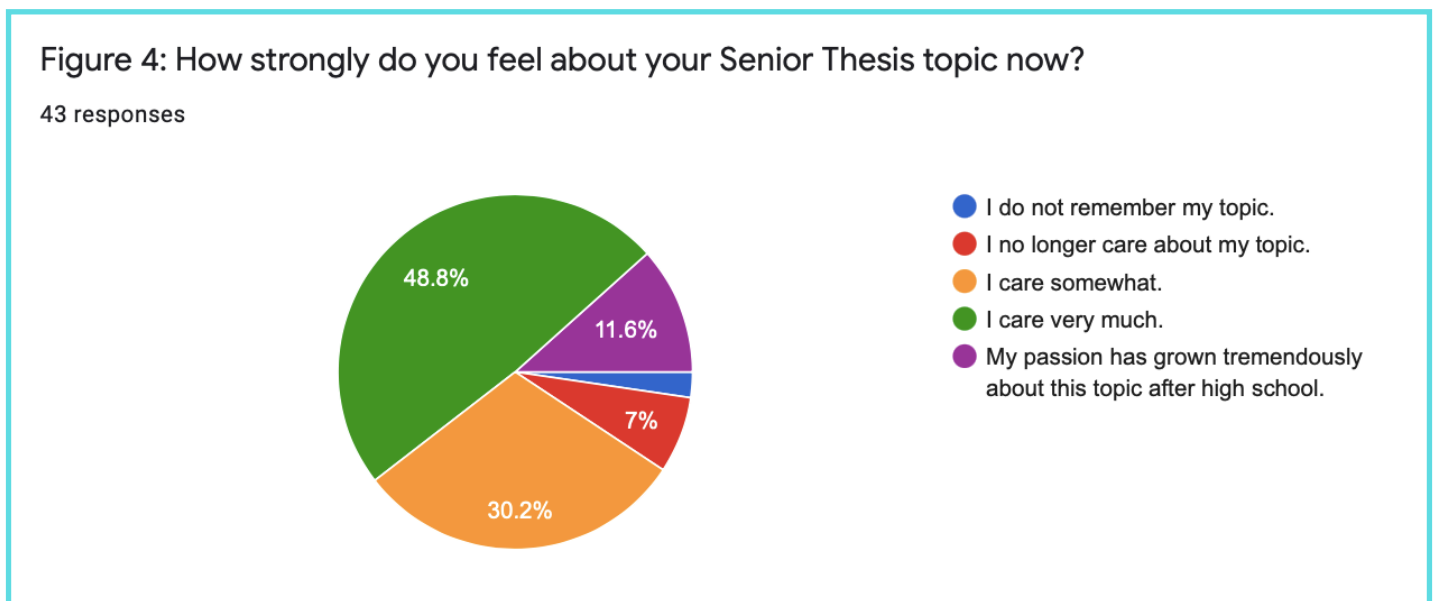
Figure 3: Are you currently employed?



We see that almost half of the respondents are employed part-time, about 30% of respondents are employed full time, 11.6% of respondents are not employed at the time, and 14% of respondents are in some kind of career or job training program. From Figures 2 and 3, we are able to see that the participants in the study are diverse in terms of their employment status and academic progress, which provides the study with desired information about how high school seniors who complete a Senior Thesis feel the experience impacted their self-efficacy in general, for college, and related to their professional abilities. One positive aspect of this survey group is that there are participants representing several categories of employment, so we can see how skills developed in Senior Thesis impacted participant feelings of professional self-efficacy.

Figure 4 below summarizes the participants' current feelings about their Thesis topics.

Figure 4: How strongly do you feel about your Senior Thesis Topic now?



Participants responded to how strongly they feel about their thesis topic today, which in some cases is as much as seven years after the project, but in most cases is two to five years after they completed Senior Thesis. In this figure, we see that nearly 50% of students still “care very much” about their topic. 30.2% of respondents report caring somewhat about their chosen topic

for their 12th grade Senior Thesis, and 11.6% of respondents, which is five out of 43 students, report that their “passion has grown tremendously about this topic after high school.” Further down in the questionnaire, several of these students shared more about how their passion and focus for their thesis topic has grown and developed as they continue in their studies. Three students from this group have pursued their topics both academically and professionally. Their detailed, open responses are included later in this paper. If we combine the “my passion has grown tremendously” and the “I care very much” groups, we see that over 60% of respondents report still feeling very strongly about their Senior Thesis topic.

This passion and focus on an important issue, and the research and writing over an extended period of time is the same kind of focus, curiosity and engagement that students and professionals are expected to demonstrate for research projects in college, and professional projects in some professional fields. Giving students the opportunity to work on a large project, with the support and academic safety net of a classroom environment, helps them be experienced and feel prepared when facing larger projects later in their academic and professional lives.

Only one student out of 43, stated that they do not even remember their topic, while three respondents reported that they no longer care about their topic. Of the three who no longer care about their topic, two of them specifically no longer agree with the stance they took on their topic as seniors in high school, but still feel that the experience was valuable. Participant #24 shares “While my actual research and content was beginner level and not something I align with today, I think it was a good simulation of collegiate academic rigor. Especially for those pursuing post-secondary education, the thesis is a stepping stone for Master’s programs, and even dissertations.” Participant #26 shared a similar reflection, “Though I don’t have the same opinion as my senior thesis, I still passionately care about mental health and other details from my senior

thesis. And I'm grateful for the opportunity to gain the experience of thinking through, writing, and presenting such a concept." The third in this group, participant #31, has nothing to do with her topic so no longer thinks about it. She explains "I am focused on environmental management now, so I don't see many areas where the thesis has an impact on me today, other than knowing that I am capable to conduct and present research." The one participant who indicated "I do not remember my thesis topic" on the survey was an example I personally remember well. Her mother chose her topic, and insisted that she would present on the particular issue because the mother felt it "should" be important to the student. The student was never interested in or committed to the topic. Topic selection is a pivotal part of the Senior Thesis topic, and is addressed at length in the discussion part of this work.

Figure 5 below summarizes level of confidence or capability that participants felt after completing Senior Thesis.

Figure 5: Did you feel more confident or capable (in any way) after completing Senior Thesis?

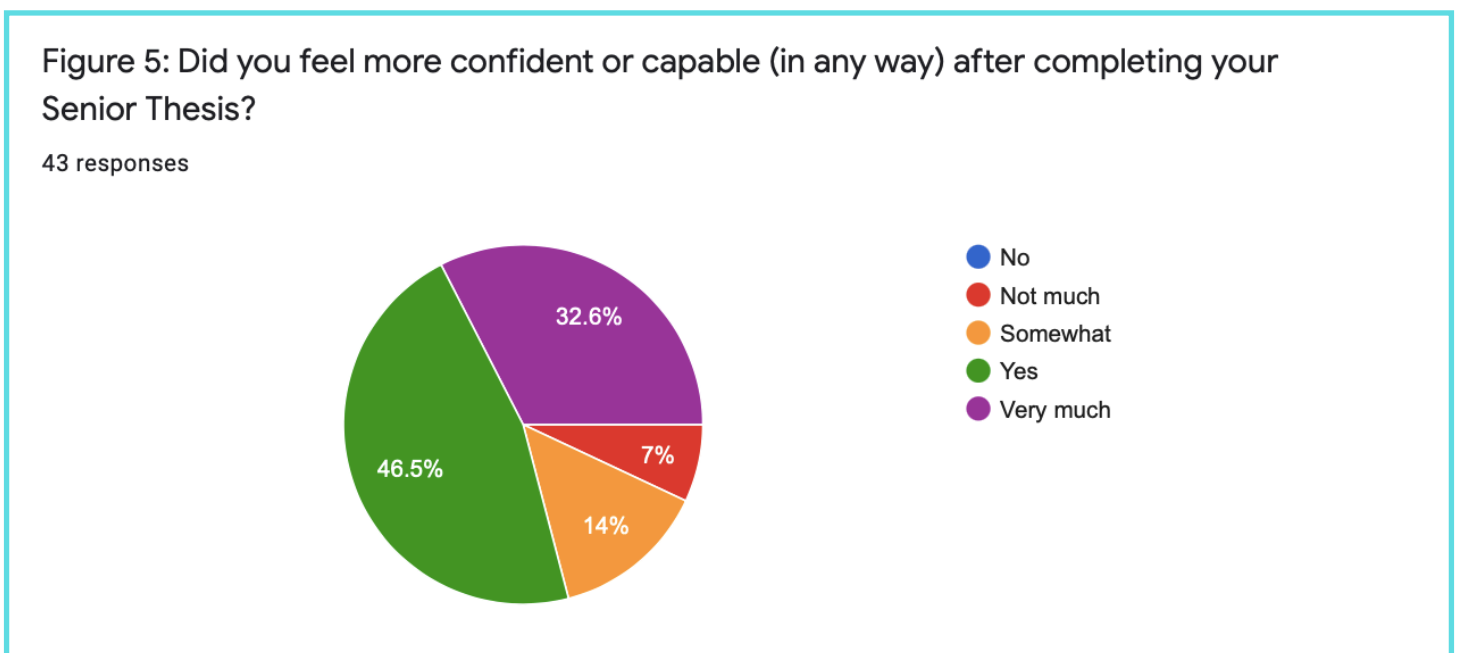


Figure 5 reflects participants' responses relating to any boost of confidence they may or may not have experienced after completing the Senior Thesis. In the class, we did not use the

term “self-efficacy,” so I did not use the specific term on the survey, though I phrased the survey questions in a way that I could make deductions about self-efficacy. From my time with these students, I believe that “self-confidence” and “feeling capable” are how they would describe self-efficacy, which is what I believe the Senior Thesis supports. In the analysis and discussion sections of my paper, I will explore whether or not the evidence collected supports my working hypothesis that the Senior Thesis graduation requirement does indeed improve a student’s self-efficacy.

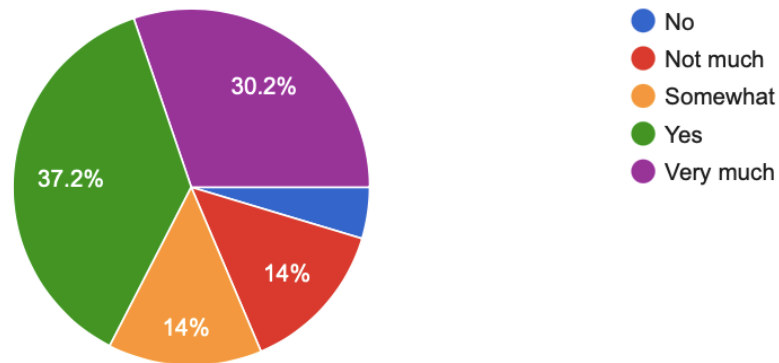
Figure 5 clearly shows that 79.1% of participants felt a clear boost in capability or confidence after completing their Senior Thesis. Only three students out of 43 (7%), felt that there was not much change to their confidence or feelings of capability, with 14% feeling at least a little bit of improvement in these areas. This figure shows that over 3/4 of the study participants clearly experienced higher confidence or self-efficacy after completing the graduation requirement and that a whopping 93.1% of participants experienced at least some increase in confidence or self-efficacy after completing Senior Thesis! When 40 out of 43 respondents indicate that there was at least some positive change to their confidence and feelings of capability, it is a result that is not attributed to chance, and is fairly moving evidence that Senior Thesis created positive change in students’ self-efficacy. Especially considering the participants’ diversity in academic and professional endeavors after high school, this figure is quite moving!

Figure 6 below summarizes study participants’ feelings of college preparedness after researching and writing Senior Thesis.

Figure 6: Did you feel more prepared for college after the researching and writing of your Senior Thesis?

Figure 6: Did you feel more prepared for college after the researching and writing of your Senior Thesis?

43 responses

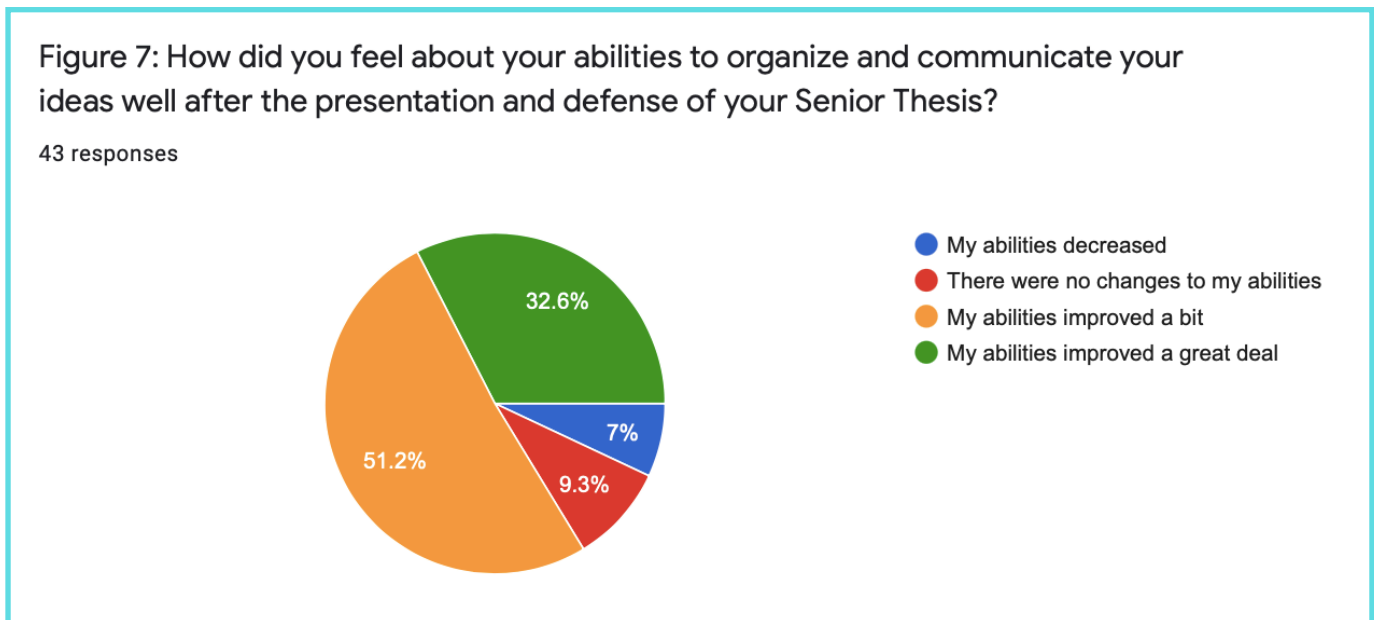


Because Senior Thesis is such a rigorous, substantial project, it makes sense that doing serious, extended research and writing about an important topic would help students develop skills they would need to be comfortable with in college. Only two out of 43 students (4.6% of respondents), did not feel more prepared for college after presenting their thesis. 14% of respondents did not feel much more prepared for college after completing Senior Thesis, but another 14% of respondents did feel somewhat more prepared for college, and over 67% of participants felt more prepared or “very much” more prepared for college after the researching and writing of their culminating project. This study specifically examines self-efficacy, not test scores, GPA, grades, or other metrics of success like college acceptance, so these results provide an opportunity for educators to ask why Senior Thesis did not improve self-efficacy when it comes to college readiness for the 18.6%, or 8 students, out of 43 respondents, and how the program can be improved to try to impact closer to 100% of student’s self-efficacy. Personal understandings of what prepares one for college and what does not will differ. Of the participants who responded “No,” or “Not much,” Participant #25 shared “Not too much impact since my major does very little writing.” Participant #9 confidently states “I already felt ready before

senior thesis.” And a few respondents shared thoughts similar to Participant #13 who shared “I didn’t feel like completing a thesis necessarily prepared me for college, but it did give me more confidence in presenting and working on a challenging project.”

Figure 7 below summarizes study participants’ feelings regarding any change in their abilities to organize and communicate their ideas well after the presentation and defense of their Senior Thesis.

Figure 7: How did you feel about your abilities to organize and communicate your ideas well after the presentation and defense of your Senior Thesis?



Oral communication skills are important in many areas of life, including professionally and in academics. Over half of the study participants felt that their abilities improved a bit, and over 30% of respondents felt that their abilities to organize and communicate their ideas well improved a great deal. Four out of 43 study participants felt that presenting and defending their thesis created no change to their abilities.

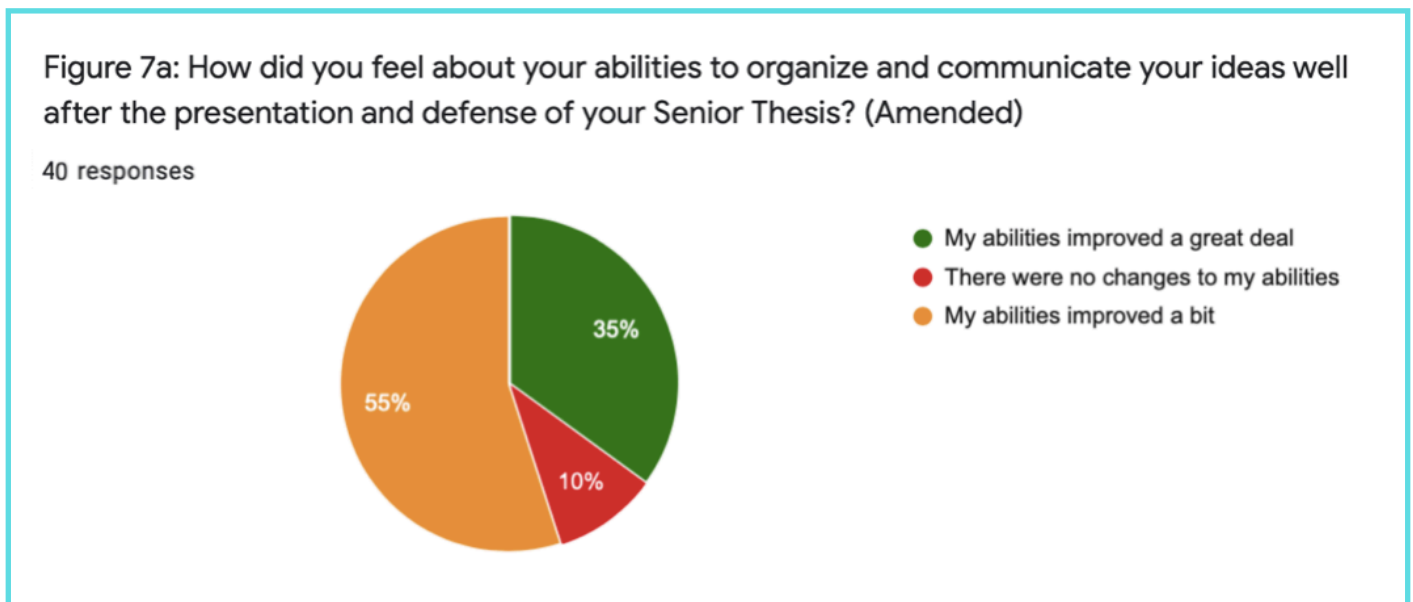
Three students chose the response “My abilities decreased.” I followed up with each student individually, and they all explained that they have not had to organize and communicate

their ideas much since Senior Thesis, and so their abilities to do so have decreased since then.

They clarified that they did not mean that their abilities decreased because of presenting or defending their thesis. Because of the unexpected response of these three participants who interpreted the question in a different way that it was intended, I have amended Figure 7 to only consider the 40 participants who responded to the question with its intended meaning.

Figure 7a below summarizes the 40 participants' feelings regarding any change in their abilities to organize and communicate their ideas well after the presentation and defense of their Senior Thesis. (Without the three participants who misunderstood the question.)

Figure 7a: How did you feel about your abilities to organize and communicate your ideas well after the presentation and defense of your Senior Thesis?



We can see that 55% of respondents felt that their abilities to communicate their ideas effectively improved a bit, and that 35% of respondents felt that their abilities improved a great deal. One of this 35%, Participant #16 shares “Being able to confidently answer questions about my topic boosted my confidence in being professional.” Participant # 28 also felt strongly, “My confidence regarding my professional abilities was very high after completing senior thesis. I had

such a great work ethic and I felt comfortable in school.” Participant #18 shared the sentiments of 23 written comments from respondents about public speaking skills developed with Senior Thesis being useful professionally. “Speaking in public has been the skill I utilize most from my thesis work in a professional environment. Knowing how to articulate answers to questions on the fly, and defend a position using previously researched examples is a skill I have to use daily.” Several other participants shared responses that mirrored these sentiments, sharing that they have used the skills they worked on during Senior Thesis in their daily college classes and at work.

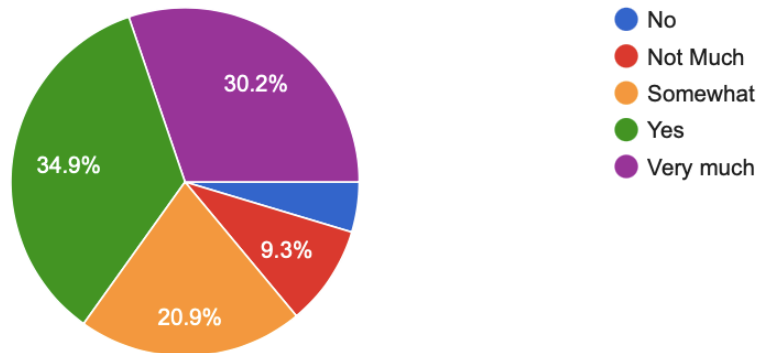
Only 10% of participants did not feel like Senior Thesis changed their abilities to communicate their ideas well. Worth noting, perhaps, is that three of the four participants who indicated that there were no changes to their abilities felt that it was because their abilities were already proficient before Senior Thesis. Participant #6 shares, “I was pretty intelligent going into college and wasn’t worried about academics. Thesis didn’t do much.” This particular student was already very confident in their abilities and did not seem to feel that Senior Thesis added much to their skills. Another participant shared nearly identical feelings as #6, and a third attributed her abilities to her experience in Speech and Debate. This participant was highly active with Speech, Debate, and Drama, stating “I would attribute the cultivation of these skills to my participation in speech & debate in high school. Senior thesis was simply an “extra speech & debate” project for me that was just another event that utilized previously learned skills.”

Figure 8 below summarizes study participants’ responses regarding college preparedness after the presentation and defense of their Senior Thesis.

Figure 8: Did you feel more prepared for college after the presentation and defense of your Senior Thesis?

Figure 8: Did you feel more prepared for college after the presentation and defense of your Senior Thesis?

43 responses



The presentation and defense of the thesis involved presenting a memorized work which was about 10 pages long, then fielding questions about their research and findings for 20 minutes. The students had to dress professionally, use a stage for presenting, stand at a podium to defend, address an audience made up of community members, teachers, topic experts, and peers, present without notes, and were questioned by a panel of judges. Though two students did not feel more prepared for college after this experience and four students felt that this experience did not help them feel much more prepared for college, 20.9% of participants felt that they were somewhat more prepared, 34.9% of participants felt more prepared for college after this experience, and 30.2% of students felt that this experience “very much” helped them feel more prepared for college. We see that 86% of participants found that they felt at least somewhat more prepared for college after the presentation and defense of their thesis!

Figure 9 summarizes study participants’ perceptions about whether skills developed in the presentation and defense of Senior Thesis benefitted them professionally.

Figure 9: Do you feel that some of the skills developed in the presentation and defense of Senior Thesis benefit you professionally?

Figure 9: Do you feel that some of the skills developed in the presentation and defense of Senior Thesis benefit you professionally?

43 responses

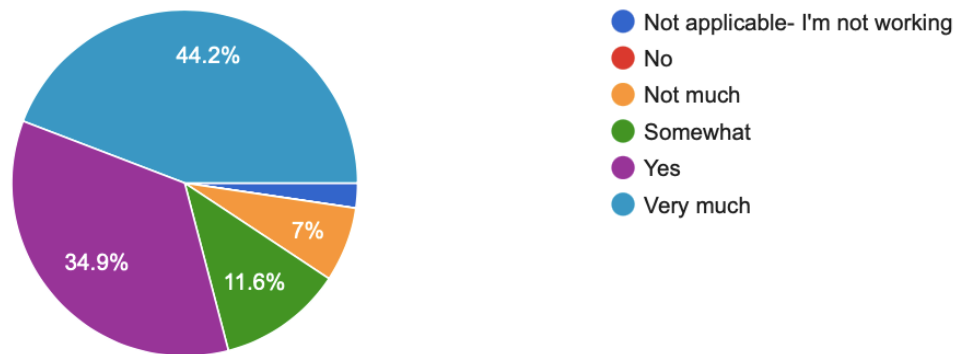
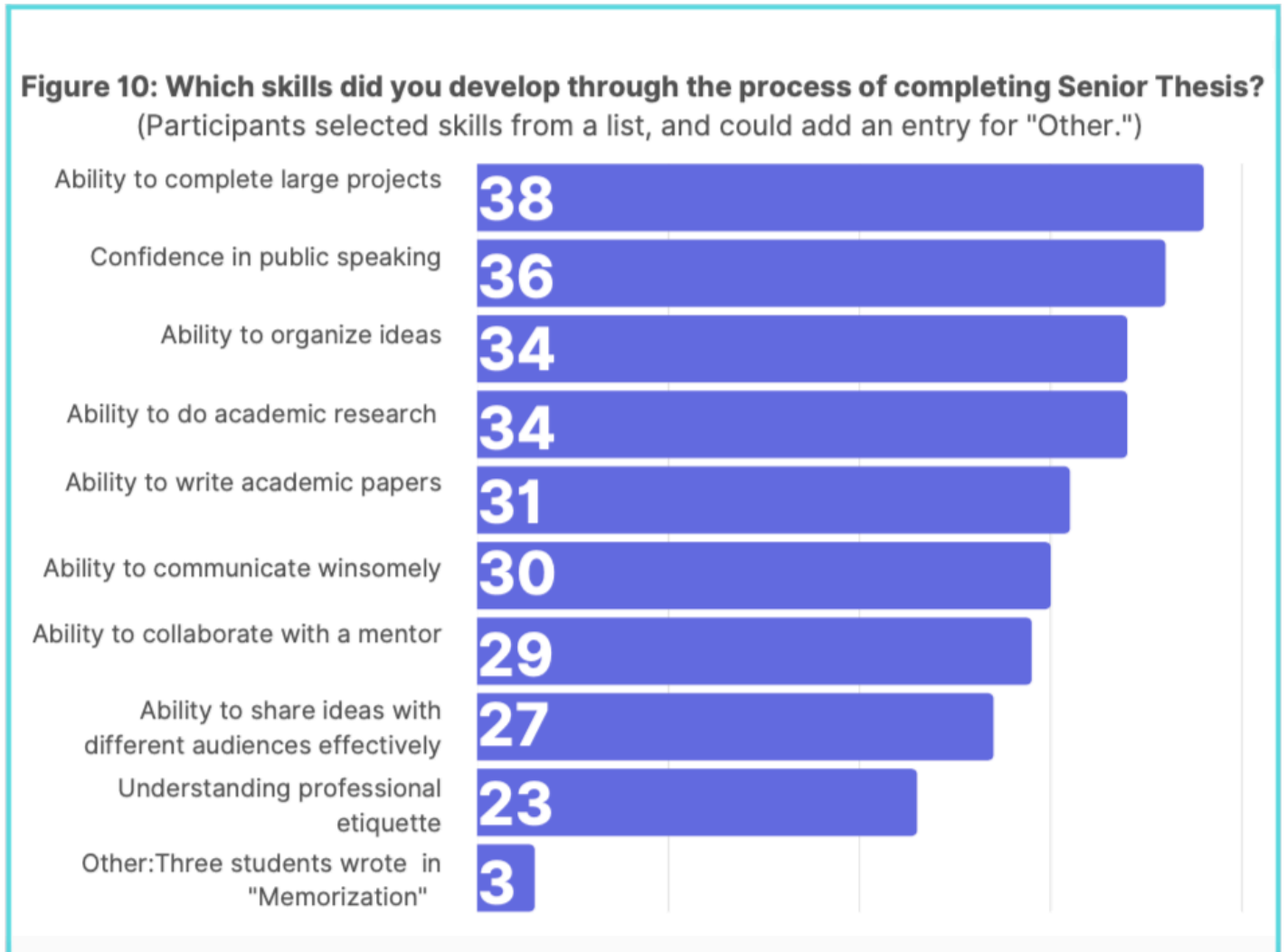


Figure 9 reveals that 44.9% of participants responded that skills developed in the presentation and defense of Senior Thesis benefitted them professionally “very much;” 39.4% of respondents felt that “yes,” these skills were professionally beneficial; 11.6% felt that the skills were only somewhat beneficially professionally; and only three participants felt that presenting and defending Senior Thesis did not benefit them professionally. One participant out of 43 is not working, so she did not feel that this question was applicable to her.

Interestingly, when sharing details about how Senior Thesis benefitted them professionally, five participants (11.6%) responded that the defense of the thesis was specifically useful as preparation for job interviews. Participant #42 shared, “The question and answer portion of Senior Thesis gave me an initial exposure to an interview setting that I have now gone through many times with job interviews and medical school interviews. That early exposure had me thinking about how I conduct myself in a professional manner at a much younger age than I would have without Senior Thesis.” Three other participants wrote that the presentation and defense of Senior Thesis “helped with thinking on my feet during interviews.”

Figure 10 summarizes the participants' response to a prompt, asking them to select skills from a list that they had developed through the process of completing their Senior Thesis.

Figure 10: Which skills did you develop through the process of completing Senior Thesis?



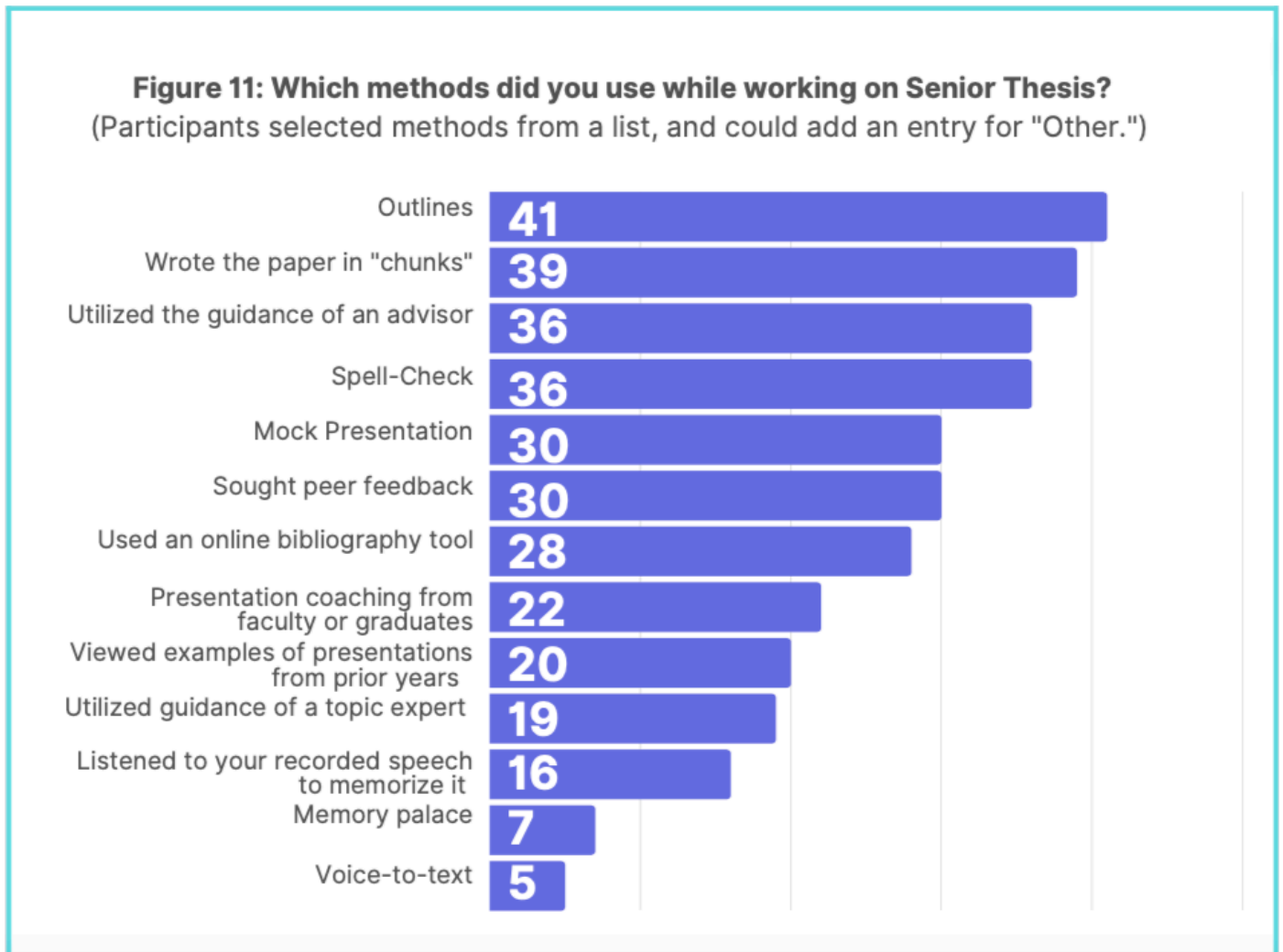
Forty-three participants answered the question. A space to write in another skill was provided. Students could select as many skills as they felt were pertinent. Thirty eight participants indicated that Senior Thesis helped them develop the ability to complete large projects. Thirty six participants indicated that Senior Thesis helped them develop confidence in public speaking. Thirty four participants indicated that Senior Thesis helped them develop their ability to organize ideas, and another 34 participants (not the exact same 34) indicated that

Senior Thesis helped them develop their ability to do academic research. Thirty one participants indicated that Senior Thesis helped them develop their ability to write academic papers. Thirty participants indicated that Senior Thesis helped them develop their ability to communicate winsomely. “Winsomely” is a term I used in the class to direct students to communicate their ideas in a winning, pleasant, convincing way, to their audience. I would say “Win your audience over by being winsome!” Twenty nine participants indicated that Senior Thesis helped them develop their ability to collaborate with a mentor. Twenty seven participants indicated that Senior Thesis helped them develop their ability to share their ideas effectively with different audiences. Twenty three participants indicated that Senior Thesis helped them develop their understanding of professional etiquette, and 3 participants wrote in “memorization,” indicating that Senior Thesis helped them develop their ability to memorize material for presentation.

Based on the results from this survey question, over 50% of participants (at least 23 out of 43) felt that Senior Thesis helped them develop skills listed in the question. Each of the skills are arguably important for college-level academic work, and for a professional. Although many jobs may not require “academic research” or “academic papers,” the other skills on the list will help young adults navigate their professional, academic, and even personal lives. Considering the fact that of the 43 study participants, 62.8% are attending college full-time, 14% did not go on to college, 16.3% are attend graduate school or are in a post-degree professional certification program, 30.2% are employed full-time, 44.2% are employed part-time, and 14% are in an internship or job-training program, the data on this figure shows that students who went on to different employment and academic statuses found that they developed important skills through the experience of Senior Thesis.

Figure 11 below summarizes the responses to the question about the methods that study participants used while working on their Senior Thesis.

Figure 11: Which methods did you use while working on Senior Thesis?



In order for Senior Thesis to be an effective graduation requirement which builds students up and prepares them for life after high school, differentiation has to be taken into account so that students with various learning styles and learning profiles can be successful with their Senior Thesis writing and presentations. This question is on the survey for participants to share which methods, out of the many provided, were actually used by the students. Their answers demonstrate how important a wide variety of teaching methods and support are for a diverse group of learners.

In Figure 11, 43 students answered the question. Forty one students indicated that they used outlines (provided by the teacher) while working on their Senior Thesis. Thirty nine students indicated that they “wrote the paper in ‘chunks’” while working on their Senior Thesis. “Chunking” one’s paper refers to breaking a larger work into smaller “chunks” that are easier to think about and work on than the entire project. Thirty six participants indicated that they utilized the guidance of an advisor, which is especially interesting since all 43 participants were assigned advisors and required to meet with them. Only 36 out of 43 participants indicated that they used the “spell-check” function on their computer while working on their paper, which is also very interesting as they all have spell-check available to them. The seven students who did not use spell check must either they are experts in grammar and spelling, or relied on their teacher and advisors to proof-read their work! Thirty participants indicated that they used mock presentations as a method to work on their Senior Thesis (presenting to peers or to an imaginary audience), and another 30 participants indicated that they sought peer feedback while working on their Senior Thesis. Twenty-eight participants indicated that they used an online bibliography tool. Students were taught in class how to do a bibliography in the Chicago style. Based on Figure 11, it would seem that 15 students did the bibliography on their own and that 28 used an online resource. Twenty-two participants indicated that they utilized the coaching of faculty or graduates while working on their Senior Thesis. Twenty participants watched presentations from prior years when preparing for their Senior Thesis.

Nineteen participants indicated that they utilized guidance of a topic expert while working on their Senior Thesis. Again, it is interesting to see that in this case less than half of the participants utilized the guidance of their topic expert. All students were connected (via email introduction) with a topic expert. It may be interesting in further studies to examine why some

students utilized the guidance of their topic expert and why some did not. There may be compatibility or rapport issues, discomfort speaking with an unknown adult, or embarrassment from the student about their own lack of expertise. Discovering the reasons that some students do not utilize the guidance of their topic experts may help teachers reduce barriers and help students be more comfortable working with their topic experts.

The least utilized skills on the list in Figure 11 are skills that I tend to see utilized by students who are not native English speakers, and/or have dyslexia (although any student who wants to may use these techniques). Sixteen students indicated that they listened to their recorded speech to memorize it. This memorization method is particularly useful to auditory learners and I have seen many students who have dyslexia use this method over others that involve reading or writing a speech over and over. English language learners can ask a teacher or a peer to record their speech, then listen to the native English-speaker's recording to study pronunciation, tone, rhythm, and inflection. It is also a useful method for those who have limited time, as they can listen to the speech while driving, while in the shower, while walking the dog, while working out, etc.

Seven participants indicated that they used "Memory Palace" while memorizing their thesis presentations. A Memory Palace is a method where students imagine a well-known place in their mind, like a building or a walk that they often take, and store mnemonic images in that memory. Mnemonic images are visual images that make information easier to memorize. In their mind, they visit specific locations in the same order, and thus make a sort of memory map of a long or complicated amount of information. Memory Palace works well for students who have powerful mental visualization abilities, but is a difficult concept for many (which may be why only seven participants indicated that they used this technique).

Only five out of 43 students indicated that they used voice-to-text while working on their Senior Thesis. This tool is on most modern computers, laptops, tablets, and cell phones. It can be especially useful to English-language-learners, those with dyslexia, and those who have very limited time to work on their papers. Using this tool does take some practice, requires the user to speak clearly, and requires the user to spend potentially more time proof-reading for formatting than if they typed their work directly, but this technique can save time and frustration, especially when it comes to spelling. Although this was the least utilized method, voice-to-text can help a student who does not have a strong grasp on English or spelling conventions to avoid feeling “stuck,” by getting content on the page.

When considering the potential application of this senior project at more schools, the data gathered through this survey provides an idea about what other, similar schools might achieve with this program. The majority of respondents to the survey indicate through their responses that Senior Thesis has helped their self-efficacy related to both academic and professional endeavors. With written responses, they add details about their experience that give the researcher insight to the value of Senior Thesis as a high school graduation requirement.

### **Discussion**

Based on the results from my survey and the additional information I gathered through follow-up questions from the 43 participants in my study, I found that presenting and defending a Senior Thesis does indeed lead to positive feelings of self-efficacy related to both academic and professional abilities in high school graduates. Though there was a range of results in terms of participants' feelings about their self-efficacy after completing Senior Thesis, a clear majority found this large graduation requirement benefitted them both academically and professionally. Specifically, 90.1% felt that presenting and defending their thesis helped them professionally

(Figure 9), and 86% felt more prepared for college after presenting and defending their thesis (Figure 8). In terms of self-efficacy, 93.1% of participants felt more confident or capable after completing Senior Thesis (Figure 5). These numbers are very high and reflect strong outcomes from this graduation project. Positive developments in self-efficacy reported in this study are similar to the positive results described in blog posts by Classical Christian educators and to the positive results found in studies on the benefits of senior capstone projects like those the AP and IB programs provide. The results of the survey show that, overall, participants felt that Senior Thesis was a beneficial experience.

This study was done at a small, private school, in a suburb on Oahu. Demographic socioeconomic factors, and the small class size probably had an impact on the quality of instruction and on the overall positive experience that the study participants had. I was able to contact 90% of my Senior Thesis students from the past seven years, and 76% of them (43 individuals) chose to participate in the study. The participants made up 69% of students who completed Senior Thesis at the school, and accurately represented the student body. While the sample size was small, this study provides rich insight to how effective a graduation requirement can be in sending graduates off into their next adventure feeling like they can take on the world. Further studies of larger schools who use Senior Thesis as a graduation requirement would shed further light on the effects of Senior Thesis on high school seniors' self-efficacy. I am especially interested in implementing this project at a larger school in the near future. Logistically, Senior Thesis demands that a school develops positive relationships with the community in order to get enough advisors and judges for presentations. Although this can be seen as a challenge, it offers schools an opportunity to develop meaningful relationships that can blossom into mentorships, internships, and even jobs for graduates! This opportunity would be valuable at any private or

public school, (just ask the Development or Advancement professionals at your school), but can be especially impactful at large public schools or Title 1 schools that have a larger population of students who have fewer adult role models. Finishing high school with the ability to collaborate with adult mentors, and with a few academic or professional working relationships under one's belt can be a huge boon to any high school graduate.

The reason that Senior Thesis may be of particular interest to educational policy makers is that unlike some of the well-known capstone programs, Senior Thesis can be beneficial to all students, whether or not they are in a “college prep” track and whether or not they are planning on attending college after high school. Existing research on Capstone (or similar) projects for high school overlooked this model, and that gap in research provided me with the impetus for this study. Having taught 12th grade at multiple schools, I have observed how stressful senior year can be, and how a senior project can either add to a student's self-efficacy, or add to burn-out. Senior Thesis is a rigorous graduation requirement, but it does not come with the often, “college-level” course load that the AP or IB programs are famous for, so can be managed and successfully completed by students who have appropriate support from a Senior Thesis instructor. I hope that these findings reassure educators that we can make a tangible difference in our students' lives. Significantly, many of the study participants graduated several years ago yet still reflect on their Senior Thesis experience with pride and appreciation. Some look back and begrudgingly admit that they learned useful skills, but they see and acknowledge the value of the experience.

This study has further cemented my passion for secondary English education and my desire to work towards equity in education. I am often struck by the inequity in resources at high schools on Oahu, and would like to work towards finding ways to mitigate this disparity. Future

issues of study related to this research include how to shape the project in a way that schools with large student-to-teacher ratios would be able to implement Senior Thesis in their 12th grade curriculum, and to develop a teacher training kit or program for dissemination of Senior Thesis teaching materials. I am encouraged by the results of this study and endeavor to boost students' self-efficacy as much as possible as I continue my teaching career. Though many students at a large and diverse school may need some level of modification or accommodation, a student who completes a Senior Thesis, gets to practice speaking professionally, working with advisors and topic experts, corresponding academically and/or professionally, researching, writing, learning/mastering a large quantity of academic content, and explaining their ideas to different audiences. These skills are helpful to students whether they go on to start their own company, or go to college. Helping students experience a "win" in terms of their abilities to problem-solve and complete a large project is a wonderful gift to send them off from high school with. Especially in today's near-post-pandemic climate, educators understand the importance of self-efficacy, a growth mindset (learning from mistakes, developing persistence through setbacks), and giving students the tools (and opportunities to learn to use them well) with which to approach difficult hurdles in life, work, and school. Though some high schools are focusing on getting students to merely pass their classes at the end of the year, a focus on achievement and capability frames the last quarter of the school year as a time of celebration instead of as a time to check off boxes and check out. Providing the framework for students to utilize the skills and abilities they have developed over the past 12 years of schooling, then present a final product in a masterful way, is a valuable, meaningful, and memorable way to finish their secondary education experience.

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**Appendix A: Study Survey Questions**

1. Informed Consent (for survey, use of materials, and use of interview and survey answers)

2. Name

(Optional field to enter email address if participant would like to learn about the research results.)

3. Age

4. Currently attend college/university (No, Yes, part time, Yes, full time, Graduated from college/university, Working on a graduate degree or post-degree professional certification)

5. Currently employed (No, Yes, part time, Yes, full time, Interning or in job training for career field)

6. How strongly do you feel about your Senior Thesis topic now? (I do not remember my topic, I no longer care about my topic, I care somewhat, I care very much)

7. How did you feel about your abilities to organize and communicate your ideas well after the presentation and defense of your Senior Thesis? (My abilities decreased, There were no changes to my abilities, My abilities improved a bit, My abilities improved a great deal)

8. Did you feel more confident after completing your Senior Thesis? (No, Not Much, Somewhat, Yes, Very Much)

9. 10. Did you feel more prepared for college after the presentation and defense of your Senior Thesis? (No, Not Much, Somewhat, Yes, Very Much)

10. Did you feel more prepared for college or professional roles after the presentation and defense of your Senior Thesis? (No, Not Much, Somewhat, Yes, Very Much)

11. Do you feel that some of the skills developed in the presentation and defense of Senior Thesis benefit you professionally? (N/A, No, Not Much, Somewhat, Yes, Very Much)

12. (Check all that apply) Which of the following skills did you develop through the process of completing your Senior Thesis? (Ability to do academic research, Ability to communicate your ideas winsomely, Ability to write academic papers, Ability to organize your ideas effectively, Ability to collaborate with a mentor/advisor, Ability to share your ideas with different audiences effectively, Confidence in public speaking, Understanding of professional etiquette, Ability to complete large projects)

13. (Check all that apply) Please select all of the methods that you used while working on Senior Thesis: (Voice to text, outlines, mock-presentations, spell-check, an online bibliography tool, memory palace, listening to your recorded speech to memorize it, utilized the guidance of advisor(s), utilized the guidance of an expert in your topic, sought peer feedback, wrote your

paper(s) in “chunks,” viewed samples of prior presentations, presentation coaching from faculty or graduates, Other, Other)

14. (Open ended question:) What (if any) aspects of Senior Thesis do you still use in your personal, professional, or academic life? (Research, writing, presenting, public speaking, supporting ideas with evidence, speaking to a specific audience, or any aspect you can think of.)
15. (Open ended question:) How did completing Senior Thesis impact your feelings of college readiness?
16. (Open ended question:) How did completing Senior Thesis impact your feelings of confidence in your own academic abilities?
17. (Open ended question:) How did completing Senior Thesis impact your feelings of confidence in your professional abilities?
18. Are there any other reflections you’d like to share about your experience with Senior Thesis in high school?

**Appendix B: Links to videos of Presentations and Defense of Theses**

- <https://vimeo.com/channels/tcs2014>
- <https://vimeo.com/channels/tcs2015>
- <https://vimeo.com/channels/tcs2016>
- <https://vimeo.com/channels/tcs2017>
- <https://vimeo.com/channels/tcs2018>
- <https://vimeo.com/channels/tcs2019>
- <https://vimeo.com/channels/tcs2020>

**Appendix C: Sample Senior Thesis Research Paper**

Reversing the Crack Down: A Drug Policy of Charitable Hope

Student Participant

Research Paper

February 23, 2020

## EXORDIUM

The modern War on Drugs is founded on an outdated and narrow understanding of how to stop and prevent habitual drug use that reaches back to the early 1900s. A series of experiments placed isolated rats in individual cages and provided them with two water dispensers, one of which was laced with morphine. Not surprisingly, the rats would almost always drink the laced water to the point of overdose. Scientists used this data to support a theory that some drugs were the chemical source of a physically uncontrollable addiction and that policies were needed to rid the world of them, no matter the costs. In the 1970s, however, a scientist named Bruce Alexander found that rats with companions and hobbies drank up to seven times less morphine than those that were isolated without activities to pursue.<sup>12</sup> Alexander has since been criticized by some, however the fundamental conclusions are unmistakable and supported by further studies as recent as 2009 – connections and daily activities are as vital to drug addiction as the chemical effects of the drug itself.<sup>3</sup>

Drug policies built on an impersonal, strictly biochemical foundation focus on criminalizing drug trafficking and possession as the ultimate solution. However, despite its meaningful aspirations, this approach has unsurprisingly failed in nearly every capacity; criminalization bears a grotesque resemblance to putting rats in cages without activity or companionship. The most common system also carries on the spirit of U.S. 20<sup>th</sup> century Jim Crow laws, as the tool of criminal justice is used most discriminately against minorities in

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<sup>1</sup> Johann Hari, “Everything You Think You Know about Addiction Is Wrong,” TED 2015. [www.ted.com/talks/johann\\_hari\\_everything\\_you\\_think\\_you\\_know\\_about\\_addiction\\_is\\_wrong/transcript](http://www.ted.com/talks/johann_hari_everything_you_think_you_know_about_addiction_is_wrong/transcript).

<sup>2</sup> Katie MacBride, “This 38-Year-Old Study Is Still Spreading Bad Ideas about Addiction,” (*The Outline*, 5 Sept. 2017), [theoutline.com/post/2205/this-38-year-old-study-is-still-spreading-bad-ideas-about-addiction?utm\\_source=contributor\\_pages](http://theoutline.com/post/2205/this-38-year-old-study-is-still-spreading-bad-ideas-about-addiction?utm_source=contributor_pages).

<sup>3</sup> Bruce K. Alexander, “Rat Park versus The New York Times,” *Globalization of Addiction*, [www.brucekalexander.com/articles-speeches/281-rat-park-versus-the-new-york-times](http://www.brucekalexander.com/articles-speeches/281-rat-park-versus-the-new-york-times).

instances concerning drug charges. Instead of fueling a racially charged mass incarceration, which only worsens the problem, nations should instead be striving for a metaphorical Rat Park, where drug users are rehabilitated rather than stigmatized, and helped into stable jobs rather than forced into purposeless, unstable lives.<sup>4</sup> There are real-life consequences for the majority of nations around the globe, which stem from an unwillingness to end this harmful approach. *Drug decriminalization is the critical next step towards fighting drug addiction, combating systemic racism and upholding public health.*

## NARRATIO

“Drug decriminalization” refers to the elimination of all criminal penalties for drug use, drug possession, and possession of drug paraphernalia (such as syringes).<sup>5</sup> Drug possession here is a specified term that implies ownership of drugs for personal use, rather than for distribution and sale. Many countries make this distinction through precise numerical thresholds, but ultimately, state police are forced to make nuanced judgments on a case-by-case basis.<sup>6</sup> Thus, it is vital that countries looking to decriminalize adopt a mindset change alongside new policies. As a point of clarity, legalization is a separate action that would introduce drugs as common goods to the nation-wide economy.<sup>7</sup> Decriminalization maintains a prohibition against currently illicit drugs while allowing for a shift in legal jurisdiction from criminal justice systems to civil and administrative government systems; since this shift decreases drug felonies and misdemeanors to legal infractions, it also entails an appropriate decrease in or removal of the associated penalties.

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<sup>4</sup> Hari, “Everything You Think You Know about Addiction Is Wrong.”

<sup>5</sup> Drug Policy Alliance, *It's Time for the U.S. to Decriminalize Drug Use and Possession*, (2017), 2.

<sup>6</sup> Artur Domoslawski, *Drug Policy in Portugal: The Benefits of Decriminalizing Drug Use*, (Open Society Foundations, 2011), 21.

<sup>7</sup> Drug Policy Alliance, 4.

Back in 1909, world powers gathered in Shanghai to determine a course of action amid the increasing circulation of opioids in the global market; the 1912 Hague Opium codified the determinations of these world actors, who advocated for a moralistic supply-centric approach to reducing drug consumption in the long run.<sup>8</sup> Drug use was stereotyped as a purely ethical choice and preparations were made to rid the world of this inherent evil.<sup>9</sup> However, it was not until the end of World War II that drug policies began to transform under the pressure of thriving U.S. soft power; it was also in this era that the United Nations (UN) entered the scene.<sup>10</sup> However, following the policy reforms of 1945, countries that previously experienced low levels of illicit drug use started witnessing a rapid increase in consumption; unsure of how to respond, many nations would follow U.S. leadership into more punitive policies.<sup>11</sup> The 1961 UN Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs, which framed its approach as a war on the “serious evil” of “addiction to narcotic drugs,” formed presuppositionally combative perspectives on drug policy that warrant heavy police and military involvement.<sup>12</sup> Reiterating the Hague Opium approach, it also pushed producer and transit countries towards stricter regulation.<sup>13</sup> Simultaneously, stricter enforcement of drug policies spread globally, catalyzed by Nixon’s infamous crackdown in the ‘70s.<sup>14</sup>

Two main themes dominated drug policies in the twentieth century. The circular justification that lawmakers employed to pass increasingly punitive policies was (and still is) a

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<sup>8</sup> John Collins, “The Economics of a New Global Strategy,” *Ending the Drug Wars*, (The London School of Economics and Political Science, 2014), 8.

<sup>9</sup> Collins, 9.

<sup>10</sup> Collins, 9.

<sup>11</sup> Collins, 9.

<sup>12</sup> Steve Rolles et al., *The Alternative World Drug Report 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition*, (Transform Drug Policy Foundation, 2016), 21.

<sup>13</sup> Collins, 15.

<sup>14</sup> Collins, 9.

reoccurring motif of the era; any harms that came from anti-drug laws were prescribed to the inherent problem of drug use, which then, in turn, “called for” even harsher laws.<sup>15</sup> Even though the 1909 Shanghai Convention began with good intentions of bettering the world, the resulting practical applications failed to acknowledge the virtually infinitely inelastic nature of drug-related goods.<sup>16</sup> The second, subtler theme that began in the late 1900s was an underlying racial agenda that rose up in response to the Civil Rights movement. Only recently did Nixon’s Presidential aide, John Ehrlichman explain,

We knew we couldn’t make it illegal to be either against the (Vietnam) war or black, but by getting the public to associate the hippies with marijuana and blacks with heroin, and then criminalizing both heavily, we could disrupt those communities. We could arrest their leaders, raid their homes, break up their meetings, and vilify them night after night on the evening news. Did we know we were lying about the drugs? Of course, we did.<sup>17</sup>

The oppression of entire categories of people still haunts the modern world; at the front lines of marginalization lies the systemically racist policing of drug crimes.

By the 2000s, nations finally began to realize that a moralistic, supply-centric approach was simply ineffective. For this reason, Portugal is a vital topic when discussing approaches to drug policy. Unlike most of the world, Portugal did not experience a nation-wide drug problem until the fall of the Salazar dictatorship in 1974.<sup>18</sup> The death of the Portuguese authoritarian regime opened its doors to the global scene and, with it, much of the vices that defined Western society. The nation’s flare-up in drug-related issues alarmed Portuguese leaders, especially as it

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<sup>15</sup> Rolles, 21.

<sup>16</sup> Collins, “The Economics of a New Global Strategy,” 10.

<sup>17</sup> Dan Baum, “Legalize It All,” *Harper’s Magazine*, Apr. 2016.

<sup>18</sup> Domoslawski, *Drug Policy in Portugal*, 13.

worsened into the 1990s.<sup>19</sup> The state arranged a team of experts, which agreed that decriminalization, alongside a public health-based intervention system, would best serve to overcome the growing issue. The success that Portugal experienced in the 2000s (Section I of the Refutatio), may help quell fears of change for those who are uncertain.

## PARTITIO

The scope of this discourse is limited to the decriminalization of drug possession and use. Production, distribution, and sale are important when discussing any drug policy, however, the primary consideration of an effective drug policy should be reducing demand by promoting the physical and social wellbeing of habitual drug users. Although this discourse advocates for global decriminalization, the United States and Portugal are specifically referenced for comparison and emphasis.

## CONFIRMATIO

### **I. Prison, Poverty, and Stigma**

The most significant problem with status quo drug policies is their unequivocal failure in achieving the claimed goals of policymakers. The War on Drugs has suffered a two-tiered defeat. The first shortcoming is at the level of global economic policies. A full explanation is unnecessary for this discourse – the main point is that the supply-centric approach to ending drug consumption fuels drug violence and organized crime.<sup>20</sup> The second shortcoming (and focus here) encompasses attempts to control demand at the state level through enforcement. National policies meant to deter, or halt drug use have delivered the exact opposite result. Upon close examination, it is clear that criminalization systemically perpetuates illegal drug consumption at every stage – before, during and after punishment.

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<sup>19</sup> Domoslawski, 15.

<sup>20</sup> Collins, “The Economics of a New Global Strategy,” 10.

In the last century, an inability to comply with drug crime laws has been increasingly mislabeled as a failure of willpower. Advancements in neuroscience by various organizations, such as the American Medical Association, have revealed that habitual drug use is a mental state characterized by compulsive behavior; the most common model in modern science compares addiction to other disorders such as diabetes.<sup>21</sup> A less radical (and more empowering model for addicts) defended by Marc Lewis, Ph.D. uses learning and conditioning to explain the automatization of habitual drug use.<sup>22</sup> The departure is that both models deconstruct the notion of criminalization as an effective deterrent. This ineffectiveness is corroborated by global studies; an analysis of 17 countries by the World Health Organization in 2008 found that more punitive policies did not correlate with lower levels of drug use.<sup>23</sup> On the contrary, punitive policies reinforce addiction by fiercely discouraging drug addicts from seeking help. Recovery methods and services that require turning themselves in are off-limits to drug users due to the harsh consequences.<sup>24</sup>

The prison system itself is a component of the drug world in many countries, due to the large number of people committed for drug charges. The United States makes approximately 1.5 million drug arrests per year, with over 80% of those arrestees charged solely with non-violent possession.<sup>25</sup> If the purpose of incapacitation is to prevent criminals from committing more crimes, it has failed for drug users. Many prisons have become centers for drug consumption

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<sup>21</sup> Alan I. Leshner, "Addiction Is a Brain Disease," *Issues in Science and Technology* 17, no. 3 (Spring 2001): <https://issues.org/leshner/>.

<sup>22</sup> Marc Lewis, "Brain Change in Addiction as Learning, Not Disease," *New England Journal of Medicine*, no. 16 (2018): DOI: 10.1056/NEJMr1602872.

<sup>23</sup> Rolles, *The Alternative World Drug Report 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition*, 85.

<sup>24</sup> Rolles, 107.

<sup>25</sup> Drug Policy Alliance, *It's Time for the U.S. to Decriminalize Drug Use and Possession*, 6.

since drug dealers and addicts are sleeping side by side.<sup>26</sup> As a result, many criminals charged with non-drug related offenses take up drug use in prison, which is unsurprising, given the lack of purpose prison walls can imbue.<sup>27</sup> The epitome of prison drug culture can be witnessed in Latin America where drug cartels fight for control of the prisons and recruit members directly from inside prison walls.<sup>28</sup>

The most detrimental effects of criminalization come post-release from prison. The long-term instability caused by a drug conviction can influence everything from one's community and social life to job opportunities and quality of life. Many professions exclude criminals (especially those with drug-related convictions) and even companies without an official statement often marginalize such criminals out of fear. Thus, steady employment is denied, even though it is a crucial step to escaping a life of poverty and drug abuse.<sup>29</sup> The stigma attached to drug-affiliated criminals (even more so than criminals in general) prevents effective rehabilitation into society.<sup>30</sup> This is especially true for homeless individuals who have been cut off from family and friends.<sup>31</sup> Again, criminalization puts up barriers to the very connections that would support habitual drug users to recover.

## **II. Mass Incarceration, Systemic Racism, and Social Breakdown**

Tragically, these barriers affect people of color the most. The disproportionate mass incarceration of ethnic minorities (known as “coercive mobility”) has begun a social breakdown

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<sup>26</sup> Rolles, 33.

<sup>27</sup> Domoslowski, *Drug Policy in Portugal*, 3.

<sup>28</sup> Harold Trinkunas, “The Network Effect: Trafficking in Illicit Drugs, Money, and People in Latin America,” Brookings, (The Brookings Institution, August 12, 2016), <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2015/12/03/the-network-effect-trafficking-in-illicit-drugs-money-and-people-in-latin-america/>.

<sup>29</sup> Rolles, *The Alternative World Drug Report 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition*, 107.

<sup>30</sup> Hari, “Everything You Think You Know about Addiction Is Wrong.”

<sup>31</sup> National Coalition for the Homeless, “Substance Abuse and Homelessness,” [nationalhomeless.org](http://nationalhomeless.org), (July 2009).

in low-income and minority communities around the globe, perpetuating drug abuse and criminal violence.<sup>32</sup> In the U.S., the statistics are the same across races –the white population uses illicit substances just as much as their black and Latino counterparts.<sup>33</sup> However, discrimination occurs at every stage. Federal sentences for crack cocaine (common among people of color) are up to 100 times more severe than for the Caucasian-favored powder cocaine. While the black community makes up only 13% of the U.S. population, they make up 29% of those charged with drug crimes.<sup>34</sup> There are various reasons for this; one is that minorities are more likely to find themselves in conspicuous areas, due to their on-average low socio-economic status.<sup>35</sup> Even beyond implicit racism, a notable study found that police would choose to pursue black open-markets over their white counterparts.<sup>36</sup> America’s heterogeneity highlights the kind of systemic racism that currently exists, but slightly more homogeneous states also see minority targeting. The UK has a similar situation with black people, while Canada and Australia disproportionately find Native peoples charged with drug offenses.<sup>37</sup>

The detrimental effects of criminalization discussed in Section I are amplified for ethnic minorities. The mass incarceration that stems from current drug policies removes a significant number of members from poor and isolated neighborhoods.<sup>38</sup> Families left behind struggle to fill the socioeconomic gap and crime increases as a result. After release, criminals find it difficult to rehabilitate back into places they have spent a significant amount of time away from, further

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<sup>32</sup> Robert D. Crutchfield et al., “The Effects of Mass Incarceration on Communities of Color,” *Issues in Science and Technology* 32, no. 1 (Fall 2015).

<sup>33</sup> Drug Policy Alliance, *It’s Time for the U.S. to Decriminalize Drug Use and Possession*, 8.

<sup>34</sup> Drug Policy Alliance, *It’s Time for the U.S. to Decriminalize Drug Use and Possession*, 8.

<sup>35</sup> Rolles, *The Alternative World Drug Report 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition*, 109.

<sup>36</sup> Crutchfield, “The Effects of Mass Incarceration on Communities of Color.”

<sup>37</sup> Rolles, 109.

<sup>38</sup> Drug Policy Alliance, 7.

disrupting both the criminal's neighborhood and attempts at sobriety.<sup>39</sup> The issue worsens from generation to generation as fathers and mothers are forced to leave their children simply for possessing any amount of an illicit substance;<sup>40,41</sup> children without fathers are five times more likely to live in poverty and twenty times more likely to end up in jail.<sup>42</sup> The greatest injustice is that these very people are losing the opportunity to influence the policies that began the War on Drugs. Over five million Americans, mostly charged with drug crimes, have lost the right to vote, including 13% of all African American men.<sup>43</sup> Decriminalization is crucial as a legal way to mitigate the consequences of a pervasive social issue that keeps society trapped in the past.

### III. Public Health

Decriminalization is also crucial for improving a nation's public health, since drug use is at its core a matter of public health. Disease, overdose, and the various other health issues of drug use have been exacerbated over the last 60 years as punitive policies have pushed drug abuse underground into unhygienic and high-risk environments.<sup>44</sup> Cases of HIV, hepatitis B (HBV) and hepatitis C (HCV), have risen drastically; roughly 10 million of the recorded 15.9 million drug users that utilize needles live with HCV and one in ten new HIV infections are a direct result of dirty needles.<sup>45</sup> Overdose is the leading cause of death among drug users; accidental overdose is largely attributed to the unpredictable levels of drug purity found among

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<sup>39</sup> Drucker, "Mass Incarceration as a Global Policy Dilemma: Limiting Disaster and Evaluating Alternatives," 64.

<sup>40</sup> Crutchfield.

<sup>41</sup> Drucker, 61.

<sup>42</sup> Barack Obama, "Obama's Father's Day Remarks," *The New York Times*, 15 June 2008, [www.nytimes.com/2008/06/15/us/politics/15text-obama.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2008/06/15/us/politics/15text-obama.html).

<sup>43</sup> Rolles, *The Alternative World Drug Report 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition*, 107.

<sup>44</sup> Rolles, 29.

<sup>45</sup> Rolles, 32.

crime-driven black markets,<sup>46</sup> but the fear of arrest also deters a majority of overdose witnesses from calling 911 for help.<sup>47</sup> Additionally, multiple studies have revealed a phenomenon where individuals that used heroin before imprisonment have an overdose rate ten times the norm during the first two weeks after release.<sup>48</sup> The cycle of addiction and homelessness fueled by drug criminalization leads to a host of other health issues that includes malnutrition, skin conditions, and trauma; even minor issues can become fatal when left untreated.<sup>49,50</sup> Lastly, the massive overlap between substance use disorders (SUD) and mental health disorders is neglected in many ways. In 2006, approximately one-fourth of U.S. inmates had an SUD and co-occurring mental health disorder.<sup>51</sup> Yet, only 11% of drug users received any form of addiction therapy,<sup>52</sup> while only a third of inmates with mental health indicators received mental health treatment.<sup>53</sup> These statistics are still declining, due to the rising trend of incarceration.<sup>54</sup>

An comprehensive public health approach to drug use consists of: (1) state-supported research of drugs and drug addiction, (2) intensive public education campaigns, and (3) public

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<sup>46</sup> Rolles, 30.

<sup>47</sup> Drug Policy Alliance, *It's Time for the U.S. to Decriminalize Drug Use and Possession*, 8.

<sup>48</sup> Ernest Drucker, "Mass Incarceration as a Global Policy Dilemma: Limiting Disaster and Evaluating Alternatives," *Ending the Drug Wars*, 65.

<sup>49</sup> National Coalition for the Homeless, "Substance Abuse and Homelessness."

<sup>50</sup> Amy Haus, ed, *Homelessness, Health, and Human Needs*, Institute of Medicine, (Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press, 1988), 41.

<sup>51</sup> Susan E. Foster, *Behind Bars II: Substance Abuse and America's Prison Population*, (New York, NY: National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University, 2010), 26.

<sup>52</sup> Foster, *Behind Bars II: Substance Abuse and America's Prison Population*, ii.

<sup>53</sup> "Indicators of Mental Health Problems Reported by Prisoners and Jail Inmates, 2011-12," Bureau of Justice Statistics, (U.S. Department of Justice, June 2017), <https://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/imhprpji1112.pdf>, 8.

<sup>54</sup> Becky Lo Dolce et al., *Drug Courts Are Not the Answer: Toward a Health -Centered Approach to Drug Use*, (Drug Policy Alliance, 2011), 6.

treatment for drug use and its possible harmful effects.<sup>55</sup> Research is necessary to continue developing therapy options for drug users and to understand the drug crisis in scientific detail. Educational campaigns should not be hostile, but target people groups most at-risk for developing unhealthy drug habits with information on the possible health consequences of drug use.<sup>56</sup> Evidence-based treatment is implemented to reduce the harmful effects of drug use, as well as to assist habitual drug users into recovery. Clean needle programs, detoxification centers, opioid substitution therapy (OST), and group psychotherapy are all examples of an integrated strategy away from a public health crisis and towards recovery.<sup>57</sup>

Thus, the ideal reformation not only involves the recession of criminal jurisdiction over personal drug possession and use, but a monumental increase in government-backed public health efforts to treat drug addiction and mitigate the harms of drug abuse. Fortunately, it is also undeniably cost-effective – for every 246 million dollars spent in law enforcement, 34 million dollars in public health treatment deliver equivalent results.<sup>58</sup> The current cycle of SUD is maintained by criminalization, itself, as well as the limitations that criminal jurisdiction has placed on the intervention of public health systems. As a result, the degree to which decriminalization is part of a larger shift towards evidence-based treatments is a critical factor for predicting the long-term decline of overall drug use.<sup>59</sup> If an initial goal of the war on drugs was to improve general public health, decriminalization will be necessary to restore its purpose and begin reversing the decline into a global health emergency.

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<sup>55</sup> Schroedel, Jean R. & Pamela Fiber, “Punitive Versus Public Health Oriented Responses to Drug Use by Pregnant Women,” (1 *Yale J. Health Pol’y L. & Ethics*, 2001), 8.

<sup>56</sup> Domoslawski, *Drug Policy in Portugal*, 24.

<sup>57</sup> Domoslawski, 30.

<sup>58</sup> Jeff Jay and Debra Jay, *Love First: A New Approach to Intervention for Alcoholism and Drug Addiction*, (Center City, Minnesota: Hazelden, 2000), 21.

<sup>59</sup> Rolles, *The Alternative World Drug Report 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition*, 149.

## REFUTATIO

**I. Responding to Fears of a Drug Epidemic**

Despite the overwhelming evidence that criminalization ultimately perpetuates all that it is meant to restrain, policies around the world remain punitive. The fear that decriminalizing drug use and possession will lead to a drug addiction epidemic has left the public unsure of implementing new policies. Yet, concerns that single uses of illicit drugs could push the masses into a lifetime of drug dependency are unwarranted. Although some individuals are significantly predisposed to certain addictive patterns and some illicit drugs are more addictive than others, the general trend from government data shows that “not even once” is, for a majority of the population, hyperbolic propaganda.<sup>60,61</sup> The Substance Abuse & Mental Health Services Administration estimated that while 50% of Americans over 12 years of age have ever used an illicit drug, less than 20% used any illicit drug in the year 2018.<sup>62,63</sup> Historical precedence validate this understanding of chemical hooks; urine tests confirmed a 95% remission rate in drug addiction for U.S. soldiers returning from Vietnam.<sup>64</sup>

In 2000, Portugal made a clean break with conventional drug policies, opting to decriminalize all drugs from marijuana to heroin.<sup>65</sup> Personal possession and use have been recategorized as an administrative offense, punishable by penalties determined by regional

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<sup>60</sup> Baum, “Legalize It All.”

<sup>61</sup> Leshner, “Addiction Is a Brain Disease.”

<sup>62</sup> Baum.

<sup>63</sup> Rachel N. Lipari et al., “Key Substance Use and Mental Health Indicators in the United States: Results from the 2018 National Survey on Drug Use and Health,” *Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration*, (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Aug. 2019), [www.samhsa.gov/data/sites/default/files/cbhsq-reports/NSDUHNationalFindingsReport2018/NSDUHNationalFindingsReport2018.pdf](http://www.samhsa.gov/data/sites/default/files/cbhsq-reports/NSDUHNationalFindingsReport2018/NSDUHNationalFindingsReport2018.pdf), 1.

<sup>64</sup> Lee N. Robins et al., “How Permanent Was Vietnam Drug Addiction?” *American Journal of Public Health* 64, no. 12\_Suppl (December 1, 1974), 39.

<sup>65</sup> Artur Domoslawski, *Drug Policy in Portugal*, 20.

panels of legal, health and social workers.<sup>66</sup> The committees are authorized to impose these sanctions on any perpetrators, but historically refrain from doing so for first-time violations. After repeated offenses, drug users are often sanctioned to fines, social work, and group therapy.<sup>67</sup> Numerical thresholds were created to differentiate between drug possession for personal use and amounts intended for sale; distribution and trafficking are still criminalized.

Since then, drug use has declined among teens and young adults, the most at-risk age range; rates of past-year and past-month drug use (a reliable method for following drug use trends) have also declined among the general population.<sup>68</sup> From 2001 to 2012, drug-induced deaths dropped by a factor of five, while new HIV cases dropped by a factor of about 18. NGOs have perhaps played the most crucial role in facilitating rehabilitation since 2001, due to a general mistrust of police members.<sup>69</sup> Yet, the majority of Portuguese police have tried to implement the public health approach and have rated the results of decriminalization as positive in nature.<sup>70</sup>

One of the most crucial steps taken by Portuguese officials was the prioritization of drug addict reintegration into society; the institutions worked with habitual users to develop plans for the future, helped them find jobs, and even provided housing for limited amounts of time.<sup>71</sup> For this reason, the leader of the Portuguese policy change, João Goulão, cautions that decriminalization, “does not have magical power as some claim;” in his opinion, it is instead a necessary step in a series of critical changes that involve new efforts in preventative education,

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<sup>66</sup> Rolles, *The Alternative World Drug Report 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition*, 158.

<sup>67</sup> Domoslawski, 26.

<sup>68</sup> Rolles, 159.

<sup>69</sup> Domoslawski, *Drug Policy in Portugal*, 29.

<sup>70</sup> Domoslawski, 34.

<sup>71</sup> Domoslawski, 31.

health treatment, and destigmatization.<sup>72</sup> The truth of this statement can be found in 25 other countries that have experienced varying results after reducing criminal drug penalties.

Regardless, conventional drug policies have repeatedly demonstrated that criminal retribution decimates rehabilitation, while decriminalization allows for those seeking recovery to have an opportunity for redemption.

## II. Responding to Moral Concerns

Those who take a hardline ethical approach to drug use may discover surprisingly convincing arguments for the ethicality of decriminalization. The primary opposition argues that drug use is immoral and therefore should be criminalized. However, the moral quality of an act should not necessitate state retribution; if it did, not a single citizen would be expected to escape incarceration (under the current system). Essentially, there must be some secondary standard under which actions ought to be criminalized. Justified government interference is rooted in the philosophy that ruling bodies are formed to protect individual rights; thus, states only have the authority to take away the rights of a citizen who has infringed upon the rights of another.<sup>73</sup> Actions that are immoral solely by way of hedonism do not fall under the jurisdiction of a governing body and punishment is found in the moral degradation of the act itself; acts like self-harm, sexual promiscuity, and drug use should not be punishable by a prison sentence.

Locke extends his point that the purpose of punishable laws is to force citizens to observe the Natural Law (Locke calls it “the will of God”),<sup>74</sup> yet it is clear that, as a general rule, drug laws cannot accomplish this goal. Decriminalization allows for a policy of opposition without retribution; this is the most appropriate policy, since drug use diminishes moral agency, but does

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<sup>72</sup> Domoslawski, 18.

<sup>73</sup> John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, (1823), 2.136.

<sup>74</sup> Locke, 2.135.

not inherently violate other persons' rights. The state is justified in prohibiting behaviors that diminish moral agency, since respect for the Natural Law is a state's ultimate purpose. It is not, however, justified in removing rights to prevent infringements that may or may not arise from drug use. If Natural Law is the ultimate goal, governments should instead seek policies that achieve adherence to this ethical code.

As an extension, a moral case may also be made against criminalization by revealing the top-down biopolitical regime drug policies give way to. The revolving door of mass incarceration propagated by current drug laws exerts control over immense amounts of people, forming a system of anti-human political overreach.<sup>75</sup> Governments have asserted that actions of non-infringement can justify restricting entire lives to the express regulation of a state. The revolving door also concerns itself with intergenerational dominance as a positive feedback cycle emerges – one in which state biopower over drug addiction leads to an increase in biopower.<sup>76</sup> Furthermore, the racially prejudiced roots of criminal policy in America turned the War on Drugs into:

[A] battle that has to be waged not between races, but by a race that is portrayed as the one true race, the race that holds power and is entitled to define the norm, and against those who deviate from that norm, against those who pose a threat to the biological heritage.<sup>77</sup>

Surely a policy of mass incarceration which in practice targets entire subsets of ethnic groups and exercises force over them for a possibly indefinite period is morally reprehensible.

### **III. Responding to Advocates of the Drug Court System**

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<sup>75</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge: The History of Sexuality Volume 1*, (1976, trans. R Hurley, 1998), 137.

<sup>76</sup> Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge*, 139.

<sup>77</sup> Michel Foucault, *Society Must be Defended*, Lecture Series at the Collège de France, (1975-76, trans. D Macey 2003), 61.

Some opponents of decriminalization argue that, although the current system of justice is ineffective, an alternative policy of criminal justice should be implemented instead. Alan Leshner, for example, points to a growing body of scientific evidence that supports an integrated approach of drug treatment under criminal justice control; he even argues that involuntary treatment can be effective under the right circumstances.<sup>78</sup> Drug courts have long been looked to as a potential middle option between decriminalization and status quo policy. In reality, however, drug courts are just as stigmatizing, counterproductive and unreliable as the current approach (if not more).

At first, the evidence for drug court systems seems convincing, but there are serious flaws with both anecdotal and empirical support. Modern drug courts exclude entire categories of criminals who are most likely to have a hard addiction, such as even the lowest level of sellers.<sup>79</sup> A more substantial issue is that most evaluations cited as “empirical evidence” are performed by the very institutions that created the programs, making them biased studies by default.<sup>80</sup> Even meta-analyses are confined to the reliability of the data that is meta-analyzed.<sup>81</sup> The proportion of participants that actually complete these programs is placed somewhere between 30 and 70 percent.<sup>82</sup> Moreover, even if any success rates were correct, drug courts are organized through small-scale agendas that use incarceration as a safety net – nation-wide adaptations would be risky at best and impossible at worst.

Drug courts have a fundamentally different goal than public health treatment. While courts strive to punish and isolate criminals into change, Portuguese-modeled approaches look

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<sup>78</sup> Leshner, “Addiction Is a Brain Disease.”

<sup>79</sup> Lo Dolce, *Drug Courts Are Not the Answer*, 7.

<sup>80</sup> Lo Dolce, 2.

<sup>81</sup> Lo Dolce, 9.

<sup>82</sup> Lo Dolce, 7.

towards rehabilitation as an essential part of growth. Relapse in health settings is met with more attentive and intensive service; judicial settings remove all services and interactions instead.<sup>83</sup> In this way, drug courts have just become a fast-paced microcosm of conventional drug crime systems; participants are essentially expected to quit cold-turkey under the threat of harsh penalties.<sup>84</sup> Furthermore, these programs have found a way to stigmatize individuals even more, since participants unable to comply are given a social badge of failure and moral inferiority.<sup>85</sup> Leshner claims a 50-60% reduction rate in drug use for court programs that implement evidence-based treatment instead.<sup>86</sup> It is important to remember, however, that the aftermath of imprisonment is also detrimental. Decriminalization is necessary for national adoption of tested treatments without the system-wide relapses caused by post-release instability, stigma, and criminal sanctions.

#### PERORATIO

There is no justification for the criminalization of drug use and possession. It does not hinder illicit drug abuse or put an end to illegal addiction, but systemically perpetuates drug dependence through isolation, stigmatization, instability, homelessness, criminal sanctions, and punitively enforced treatment methods. Criminal penalties are not advised by a modern scientific understanding of the issue and are campaigned against by experts in their field, such as João Goulão and Bruce Alexander. A third expert, Dr. Gabor Mate, explained that this is the kind of system that would be created if someone wanted habitual drug use to increase – and indeed, this

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<sup>83</sup> Lo Dolce, 12.

<sup>84</sup> Lo Dolce, 16.

<sup>85</sup> Lo Dolce, 2.

<sup>86</sup> Leshner, “Addiction Is a Brain Disease.”

trend that has been witnessed since 1945.<sup>87</sup> Penal laws are not holding back a drug epidemic, but are holding back evidence-based treatment and proper health care for those most at risk of overdose and preventable disease. Incarceration is not mandated by morality; instead, it provides fertile soil for systemic racism and excessive governmental interference. The shift towards a solution that treats people as humans, rather than a means to an end, is on the horizon, and decriminalization is the critical next step.

It is not until over a century after the 1909 Shanghai Convention that global leaders have begun to acknowledge the fundamental issues with conventional drug policies and the failure of the War on Drugs. In 2016, the UN unanimously passed an outcome document on the world drug problem. In clause 1.(i), countries agreed to:

Recognize drug dependence as a complex, multifactorial health disorder characterized by a chronic and relapsing nature with social causes and consequences that can be...treated through...effective scientific evidence-based drug treatment, care, and rehabilitation programs...and strengthen capacity for...social reintegration of individuals with substance use disorders, including...effective reintegration into the labor market...;<sup>88</sup>

Despite this affirmation, however, the UN still clings to the 1961 UN Single Convention, a main proponent of the conventional War on Drugs.

The world is making significant strides in affirming the Portuguese model, and yet, a real-life policy transformation still seems off in the distance for many nation-states. It is crucial that cultural perspectives on drugs and drug addicts shift, both to affect legislative change in the

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<sup>87</sup> Hari, "Everything You Think You Know about Addiction Is Wrong."

<sup>88</sup> Thirtieth Special Session General Assembly, "Outcome Document of the 2016 United Nations General Assembly Special Session on the World Drug Problem," (*United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime*, June 2016), [www.unodc.org/documents/postungass2016/outcome/V1603301-E.pdf](http://www.unodc.org/documents/postungass2016/outcome/V1603301-E.pdf), 6.

status quo and to prepare for the new challenges that decriminalization might entail.<sup>89</sup> It is not guaranteed that the shift in policy that this discourse advocates for would be an easy transition. Yet, it is the obligation of the people to stand up for the human dignity that every individual possesses. It may be more convenient to blame addiction purely on addicts and dependence solely on drugs, to lock habitual drug users away, and forget the issue in all its pervasive gravity. However, this kind of convenience is in the end a façade for the acceptance of any despair which has not yet become personal. In contrast, decriminalization is both loving and just, paving the way for a policy of charitable hope.

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<sup>89</sup> Susana Ferreira, "Portugal's Radical Drugs Policy Is Working. Why Hasn't the World Copied It?" *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 5 Dec. 2017, [www.theguardian.com/news/2017/dec/05/portugals-radical-drugs-policy-is-working-why-hasnt-the-world-copied-it](http://www.theguardian.com/news/2017/dec/05/portugals-radical-drugs-policy-is-working-why-hasnt-the-world-copied-it).

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**Appendix D: Sample Senior Thesis Presentation**

REVERSING THE CRACKDOWN: A DRUG POLICY OF CHARITABLE HOPE

Student Participant

Rhetoric

April 16, 2020

## EXORDIUM

Throughout our lives, we build up habits that streamline how we live on a daily or sometimes weekly basis. You might wake up, brush your teeth and drive to work, all without even thinking twice. But in 2018, over 8 million American adults had at some point added illegal drug abuse to the weekly routine.<sup>90</sup> And I'm here today to talk about how we can help them.

The modern War on Drugs is founded on an outdated understanding of how to stop habitual drug use. Our laws are fueling mass incarceration by driving drug addicts into a criminal justice system that makes things worse. There are real-life criminal, racial and health consequences for these countries, which stem from an unwillingness to end this harmful approach. Instead, we should look to a brighter future, one of rehabilitation, destigmatization, and stable jobs rather than unstable lives. *Drug decriminalization is the crucial next step towards fighting drug addiction, combating systemic racism, and upholding public health.*

## NARRATIO

Now, when I use the term drug decriminalization, I'm referring to the elimination of criminal penalties for personal drug possession and use, as well as for drug paraphernalia – things like syringes.<sup>91</sup> Don't freak out, because this is very different from legalization, which removes government entirely.<sup>92</sup> Decriminalization just means that a country is changing the way they address the issue. Instead of punishing people and sending them to years in prison, we can try them in a civil court and give them sanctions – anything from fines to mandatory rehab – but I'll talk more about that later. For now, let me give you a condensed history of how we got to

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<sup>90</sup> Rachel N. Lipari et al., "Key Substance Use and Mental Health Indicators in the United States: Results from the 2018 National Survey on Drug Use and Health," *Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration*, (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Aug. 2019), [www.samhsa.gov/data/sites/default/files/cbhsq-reports/NSDUHNationalFindingsReport2018/NSDUHNationalFindingsReport2018.pdf](http://www.samhsa.gov/data/sites/default/files/cbhsq-reports/NSDUHNationalFindingsReport2018/NSDUHNationalFindingsReport2018.pdf), 2.

<sup>91</sup> Drug Policy Alliance, *It's Time for the U.S. to Decriminalize Drug Use and Possession*, (2017), 2.

<sup>92</sup> Drug Policy Alliance, 4.

where we are today. While history isn't always the most interesting, it is really important. It's too easy for a generation to accept the social landscape they were born into. I think it's time for us to reconsider.

It all started in 1909 where world powers gathered in Shanghai to decide what to do about the growing supply of opioids in the global market. Because of their decisions, there were three main crackdowns in the twentieth century and each one led to an increase in illegal drug use. But instead of changing their approach, countries cracked down even harder.<sup>93</sup> Every time things got worse, we just fought back with harsher laws. But criminal penalties only led to rises in drug abuse – and that was the vicious cycle of justification that was used in the twentieth century.<sup>94</sup> I don't know about you guys, but for me, it's like watching a horror movie – one where we walked into the creepy shed full of weapons at midnight.

One side note I should make is about the country of Portugal. Unlike most other states, Portugal didn't experience a nation-wide drug problem until they opened their doors to the world in 1974.<sup>95</sup> By the 90s, Portugal had the highest rate of illegal drug use in Europe, but they didn't want to continue the tested and failed conventional War on Drugs.<sup>96</sup> Instead, the state arranged a team of experts, which agreed that decriminalization, along with public health intervention, would best overcome the growing issue. By the end of my presentation you'll see why Portugal made the right decision.

## PARTITIO

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<sup>93</sup> John Collins, "The Economics of a New Global Strategy," *Ending the Drug Wars*, (The London School of Economics and Political Science, 2014), 9.

<sup>94</sup> Steve Rolles et al., *The Alternative World Drug Report 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition*, (Transform Drug Policy Foundation, 2016), 21.

<sup>95</sup> Artur Domoslawski, *Drug Policy in Portugal: The Benefits of Decriminalizing Drug Use*, (Open Society Foundations, 2011), 13.

<sup>96</sup> Domoslawski, 15.

Let me give you an idea of where we're headed; just in case you tune out, you'll at least know what I was going to talk about. First, we'll look at why the current system doesn't work and how it has become an issue concerning races and classes. Then I'll discuss the kind of approach we should be using instead. At the end I'll respond to some big concerns like – practicality, ethicality and the alternative drug court system.

## CONFIRMATIO

### **I. Prison, Poverty, and Stigma**

So first thing's first – what is wrong with the current system? A leader in the field, Dr. Gabor Mate says it's the kind of system you would create if you wanted to perpetuate drug addiction,<sup>97</sup> but it's only now after a century that world leaders have begun to acknowledge something has to change. The system has three stages.

The first stage comes before prison. The basic premise of criminal law is that people will avoid punishable actions. It assumes that citizens are always thinking rationally. But if there's one thing that people from Thomas Aquinas to modern scientists have agreed upon, it's that addiction hijacks and rewires the brain, so the decision-making process becomes irrational. Thus, drug laws simply don't work. A study of 17 countries by the World Health Organization found that harsher laws did not correlate with lower levels of drug use.<sup>98</sup> Instead, these laws discourage drug addicts from seeking help, because nobody is willing to go to prison just to rid themselves of a habit, even one as detrimental as drug abuse.<sup>99</sup>

The second stage is imprisonment and while we like to think of prison as a place where drug users can come clean, the tragic reality is that this rarely happens. Many jails are drug

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<sup>97</sup> Johann Hari, "Everything You Think You Know about Addiction Is Wrong," TED 2015. [www.ted.com/talks/johann\\_hari\\_everything\\_you\\_think\\_you\\_know\\_about\\_addiction\\_is\\_wrong/transcript](http://www.ted.com/talks/johann_hari_everything_you_think_you_know_about_addiction_is_wrong/transcript).

<sup>98</sup> Rolles, *The Alternative World Drug Report 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition*, 85.

<sup>99</sup> Rolles, 107.

centers where dealers and users sleep side by side.<sup>100</sup> Interviews by the Economist showed that in some prisons, illegal drugs are easier to get than your basic bar of soap.<sup>101</sup>

The last and most devastating stage of the process is post-release from prison. There's a lot of social stigma surrounding drug criminals in particular. As a result, it becomes very hard to get or keep a job, make essential social connections or even find a place to live. So why are we as a society so surprised that drug addicts turn back to drugs? Without an income, a home or even decent friends, why wouldn't you?

## **II. Mass Incarceration, Systemic Racism, and Social Breakdown**

Members of ethnic minorities are especially susceptible to getting trapped in this lifestyle, partially due to their on-average low socio-economic status. More importantly, however, the system was geared against them before they were even born. For some, it is hard to acknowledge the injustices in our own country, but in this case, reality is undeniably racially charged.

Recently, Nixon's Presidential aide came forth saying,

We knew we couldn't make it illegal to be...Black, but by getting the public to associate...Blacks with heroin, and then criminalizing...heavily.... We could arrest their leaders...vilify them night after night on the evening news. Did we know we were lying about the drugs? Of course, we did.<sup>102</sup>

In the U.S., white people use illicit substances just as much as their Black and Latino counterparts,<sup>103</sup> but minorities still end up facing more prison time for their actions.

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<sup>100</sup> Rolles, *The Alternative World Drug Report 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition*, 33.

<sup>101</sup> The Economist, "Supply and Remand," The Economist Group Limited, 5 Dec. 2013, [www.economist.com/britain/2013/12/05/supply-and-remand](http://www.economist.com/britain/2013/12/05/supply-and-remand).

<sup>102</sup> Dan Baum, "Legalize It All," *Harper's Magazine*, Apr. 2016.

<sup>103</sup> Drug Policy Alliance, *It's Time for the U.S. to Decriminalize Drug Use and Possession*, 8.

Discrimination occurs at every stage. First the laws are biased. A good example is the cocaine policy; the white and Black communities both use cocaine, however powder cocaine is more prevalent among white people, while crack cocaine is more common among people of color. But federal sentences for crack cocaine are up to 100 times more severe than for powder cocaine.<sup>104</sup> Second, police practices are biased. Not only are minorities more likely to be caught because of their low socio-economic status,<sup>105</sup> a notable study found that police would choose to pursue Black open markets over their white counterparts.<sup>106</sup> And so, while Blacks only make up 13% of the population, they face 29% of drug charges.<sup>107</sup> Other countries like England, Canada, and Australia all have similar inequalities.<sup>108</sup>

This process is called discriminative jailing and has serious repercussions for these people groups. As drug laws remove a significant number of members from rundown neighborhoods,<sup>109</sup> families left behind struggle to fill the gap. And when these so-called criminals return, they find it even harder to fit into the messy homes they left behind. Everyone suffers as a result.<sup>110</sup> From generation to generation, parents are forced to leave their children for simple and small drug charges;<sup>111,112</sup> and taking away children's fathers only continues the

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<sup>104</sup> Crutchfield, Robert D., and Gregory A. Weeks. "The Effects of Mass Incarceration on Communities of Color." *Issues in Science and Technology* 32, no. 1 (Fall 2015).

<sup>105</sup> Rolles, *The Alternative World Drug Report 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition*, 109.

<sup>106</sup> Crutchfield.

<sup>107</sup> Drug Policy Alliance, *It's Time for the U.S. to Decriminalize Drug Use and Possession*, 8.

<sup>108</sup> Rolles, 109.

<sup>109</sup> Drug Policy Alliance, 7.

<sup>110</sup> Drucker, "Mass Incarceration as a Global Policy Dilemma: Limiting Disaster and Evaluating Alternatives," 64.

<sup>111</sup> Crutchfield.

<sup>112</sup> Drucker, 61.

cycle.<sup>113</sup> However, the worst injustice is that there's less and less they can even do to change the system. 13% of all African American men no longer have the right to vote, mostly due to drug charges. And although we cannot fix these biases through laws, we can stop the detrimental effects that they have when given too much power.

### III. Public Health

So what is the best approach then? I've talked about many of the reasons why we shouldn't focus on criminality, but there is something we should focus on – and that's public health. Addiction, disease, overdose, and many other problems from drug use have been exacerbated over the last 60 years. Overtime, laws pushed drug abuse underground and into high-risk environments.<sup>114</sup> Witnesses of overdose are so afraid to call 911 for help that it has become the leading cause of death among drug users.<sup>115</sup> The cycle of addiction and homelessness fueled by drug criminalization leads to a host of health issues that are fatal when left untreated.<sup>116,117</sup> Lastly, the significant problem of mental health goes overlooked in the criminal justice system. Mental health and substance abuse disorders often overlap, but in the U.S. only one in ten addicts and one in three with mental health conditions receive any kind of therapy in

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<sup>113</sup> Barack Obama, "Obama's Father's Day Remarks," *The New York Times*, 15 June 2008, [www.nytimes.com/2008/06/15/us/politics/15text-obama.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2008/06/15/us/politics/15text-obama.html).

<sup>114</sup> Rolles, *The Alternative World Drug Report 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition*, 29.

<sup>115</sup> Drug Policy Alliance, *It's Time for the U.S. to Decriminalize Drug Use and Possession*, 8.

<sup>116</sup> National Coalition for the Homeless, "Substance Abuse and Homelessness."

<sup>117</sup> Amy Haus, ed, *Homelessness, Health, and Human Needs*, Institute of Medicine, (Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press, 1988), 41.

jail.<sup>118,119,120</sup> And frankly, the statistics have only gotten worse.<sup>121</sup> This is the cost if we as a society aren't willing to step up and make a serious change.

What does the public health approach look like? Well, there are two main components that you should know about. The first is education.<sup>122</sup> It's important to teach those who are most at risk, like minorities who have grown up in poor neighborhoods, about the possible health consequences of drug use from a young age.<sup>123</sup> It's not good enough for a society to vaguely know that illicit drugs are dangerous; we have to teach them how and why. The second component is treatment. Evidence-based treatment is used to reduce the harmful effects of drug use, and help habitual drug users in recovery. Clean needle programs, detox centers, opioid substitution therapy (OST), and group psychotherapy are all examples of an integrated strategy away from the health crisis and towards rehabilitation.<sup>124</sup> The cost-effectiveness is astounding – public health treatment is in practice over 7 times cheaper than law enforcement while delivering equal or better results.<sup>125</sup> Ultimately, the criminal system has placed serious limitations on the capabilities of public health intervention. If we truly care about public health, decriminalization is the way to go in creating a long-term decline in drug use.<sup>126</sup>

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<sup>118</sup> Susan E. Foster, *Behind Bars II: Substance Abuse and America's Prison Population*, (New York, NY: National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University, 2010), 26.

<sup>119</sup> Foster, *Behind Bars II: Substance Abuse and America's Prison Population*, ii.

<sup>120</sup> "Indicators of Mental Health Problems Reported by Prisoners and Jail Inmates, 2011-12," Bureau of Justice Statistics, (U.S. Department of Justice, June 2017), <https://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/imhprj1112.pdf>, 8.

<sup>121</sup> Becky Lo Dolce et al., *Drug Courts Are Not the Answer: Toward a Health -Centered Approach to Drug Use*, (Drug Policy Alliance, 2011), 6.

<sup>122</sup> Schroedel, Jean R. & Pamela Fiber, "Punitive Versus Public Health Oriented Responses to Drug Use by Pregnant Women," (1 Yale J. Health Pol'y L. & Ethics, 2001), 8.

<sup>123</sup> Domoslawski, *Drug Policy in Portugal*, 24.

<sup>124</sup> Domoslawski, 30.

<sup>125</sup> Jeff Jay and Debra Jay, *Love First: A New Approach to Intervention for Alcoholism and Drug Addiction*, (Center City, Minnesota: Hazelden, 2000), 21.

<sup>126</sup> Rolles, *The Alternative World Drug Report 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition*, 149.

## REFUTATIO

**I. Responding to Fears of a Drug Epidemic**

Now some you still might be skeptical. Even though the current system is bad, there is a lot of fear that changing the law will only make things worse. This is partially because of misinformation on the effects of drugs. It is true that many illegal drugs are much more addictive than other substances, but there is a false conception about the danger of drug hooks. Some sources make it seem like a single hit will ruin your entire life. But the truth is, only some people have this kind of genetic predisposition. Less than half of adults who had ever tried drugs were still using in 2018.<sup>127,128</sup> And 95% of U.S. drug-using soldiers returning from Vietnam dropped their habit upon reentry.<sup>129</sup> But if you still aren't convinced, let me reintroduce the nation of Portugal.

In 2000, Portugal decriminalized all drugs from marijuana to heroin,<sup>130</sup> so personal drug possession and use are now administrative offenses. Instead of a courtroom, drug users are sent to a panel of legal and health experts,<sup>131</sup> and after repeated offenses, are sanctioned with fines, social work, or group therapy.<sup>132</sup>

Since then, drug use has declined among teens and young adults, and the rate of past-year drug use has declined for the general population.<sup>133</sup> From 2001 to 2012, drug-induced deaths

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<sup>127</sup> Baum.

<sup>128</sup> Lipari, "Key Substance Use and Mental Health Indicators in the United States: Results from the 2018 National Survey on Drug Use and Health," 1.

<sup>129</sup> Lee N. Robins et al., "How Permanent Was Vietnam Drug Addiction?" *American Journal of Public Health* 64, no. 12\_Suppl (December 1, 1974), 39.

<sup>130</sup> Artur Domszlawski, *Drug Policy in Portugal*, 20.

<sup>131</sup> Rolles, *The Alternative World Drug Report 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition*, 158.

<sup>132</sup> Domszlawski, 26.

<sup>133</sup> Rolles, 159.

dropped by a factor of five, while new HIV cases dropped by a factor of about 18. One of the best signs that it works is that nobody really wants to go back to the old system even though it was a controversial subject at the beginning of the process.

Perhaps the most crucial move Portuguese officials made was helping drug addicts reintegrate into society; institutions helped habitual users make plans for the future, helped find jobs, and they even provided housing for limited time periods.<sup>134</sup> To be painfully blunt, this is what it looks like to care for people rather than sticking them in a cage.

## **II. Responding to Moral Concerns**

Society has been doing it this way for so long, some of you might still feel hesitant if you see drug use as inherently immoral. If this is what you believe, wouldn't you want to help hard drug users kick the habit all the more? From everything we've seen so far, punitive policies place that goal far out of reach. I believe the state should use its jurisdiction in a different way, not punitively, but restoratively. The great Christian philosopher Thomas Aquinas believed that human law was primarily a work of reason and that coercive power should always come secondary.<sup>135</sup> So let's be reasonable then; prison is not a magic wand that can make our problems disappear. An issue like drug addiction often has much deeper roots, and since we as a society have slowly traded away our most important good – human connection, prison starves them of the only thing that could save them. Proverbs 14:21 says it is a sin to despise one's neighbor, but blessed is the one who is kind to the needy. Decriminalization makes room for a policy of charitable hope.

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<sup>134</sup> Domoslawski, 31.

<sup>135</sup> John Goyette, "On the Transcendence of the Political Common Good: Aquinas versus the New Natural Law Theory," *The National Catholic Bioethics Quarterly*, vol. 13, no. 1, 2013, pp. 133–155., doi:10.5840/ncbq201313174.

Now criminalization has its own moral flaws.<sup>136</sup> The U.S. makes about one-and-a-half million drug arrests per year and over 80% are for non-violent possession alone.<sup>137</sup> In this way, governments have built a system of anti-human overreach where the masses are sent to prison for vices as personal as hedonism. More than that, it is a system that targets certain races and imprisons them, maybe for forever. And that is morally reprehensible.<sup>138</sup>

### **III. Responding to Advocates of the Drug Court System**

For those of you who've done their homework on this issue, you might be thinking that drug courts are a much safer solution to this problem. The drug court system uses coercive treatment under the threat of imprisonment and has often been looked to as a middle path between two extremes. Expert scientists like Alan Leshner argue that involuntary treatment can be effective under the right circumstances.<sup>139</sup> But the reality is that drug courts are just as stigmatizing and counterproductive as the current approach.

First off, there are serious flaws with the evidence in favor of drug courts. The studies hand pick participants and exclude those most likely to have a hard addiction.<sup>140</sup> Even worse, the studies are done by the institutions that created the programs in the first place, making them biased by default.<sup>141</sup> Regardless, governments simply don't have the capability to use drug courts across the nation, and most criminals would just end up in prison anyway.

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<sup>136</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge: The History of Sexuality Volume 1*, (1976, trans. R Hurley, 1998), 137.

<sup>137</sup> Drug Policy Alliance, *It's Time for the U.S. to Decriminalize Drug Use and Possession*, 6.

<sup>138</sup> Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge*, 139.

<sup>139</sup> Leshner, Alan I. "Addiction Is a Brain Disease." *Issues in Science and Technology* 17, no. 3 (Spring 2001): <https://issues.org/leshner/>.

<sup>140</sup> Lo Dolce, *Drug Courts Are Not the Answer*, 7.

<sup>141</sup> Lo Dolce, 2.

Aside from the evidence, drug courts have a fundamentally different goal than public health treatment. While courts strive to punish and isolate criminals into change, Portuguese-modeled approaches look towards rehabilitation as an essential part of change. Relapse in a drug court setting is met with more punishment; but relapse in a health setting is met with better care.<sup>142</sup> In the end, drug courts are no different than the prison system – people are expected to quit cold-turkey under the threat of harsh penalties.<sup>143</sup> And even those who do make it will likely relapse after being released because of the instability and stigma that a criminal record entails.

#### PERORATIO

We've come to the end now, and can see that there really isn't any good reason for the criminalization of drug use and possession. As we've seen, it actually perpetuates drug addiction through a cycle of criminal sanctions, isolation, instability, and homelessness. Rather than holding back a drug epidemic, punitive laws are holding back evidence-based treatment and proper health care for those most at risk of overdose and preventable disease. And though it is called the criminal justice system, you have clearly heard now about the injustice of mass incarceration, systemic racism and excessive governmental interference.

It is not until over a century after the 1909 Shanghai Convention that global leaders have started to see the failure of the War on Drugs. In 2016, the United Nations unanimously agreed to: Recognize drug dependence as a health disorder, provide evidence-based treatment, and strengthen rehabilitation services to include the labor market.<sup>144</sup> But even though the world is making significant strides on this issue, a real-life policy transformation still seems off in the

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<sup>142</sup> Lo Dolce, *Drug Courts Are Not the Answer*, 12.

<sup>143</sup> Lo Dolce, 16.

<sup>144</sup> Thirtieth Special Session General Assembly, "Outcome Document of the 2016 United Nations General Assembly Special Session on the World Drug Problem," *United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime*, June 2016, [www.unodc.org/documents/postungass2016/outcome/V1603301-E.pdf](http://www.unodc.org/documents/postungass2016/outcome/V1603301-E.pdf).

distance for many countries. It is important that in the meantime you and I do our part in shifting public ideas about this topic, because not much will change as long as we're in the minority.<sup>145</sup> If you yourself still aren't convinced I would encourage you to do your own research or strike up a conversation with a friend. If everybody talks with just one other person, that's how ideas are spread and that's how cultures eventually shift. A solution that treats people as humans, rather than just a means to an end, is on the horizon, and decriminalization is the critical next step.

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<sup>145</sup> Susana Ferreira, "Portugal's Radical Drugs Policy Is Working. Why Hasn't the World Copied It?" *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 5 Dec. 2017, [www.theguardian.com/news/2017/dec/05/portugals-radical-drugs-policy-is-working-why-hasnt-the-world-copied-it](http://www.theguardian.com/news/2017/dec/05/portugals-radical-drugs-policy-is-working-why-hasnt-the-world-copied-it).

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**Appendix E: Senior Thesis Handbook for Students and Guardians**

**THESIS HANDBOOK**

A RESOURCE FOR SENIORS AND THEIR PARENTS/GUARDIANS

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## Introduction

### *The Purpose and Role of Senior Thesis as a Graduation Requirement*

For many ages, presentation and defense of a thesis was the defining moment of a classically educated student's career. This graduation project not only will help seniors polish their research and presentation skills, it will prepare them for many challenges they will face in academics, and in the professional world. Successfully completing this comprehensive, culminating assignment, will help graduates develop persistence, growth-mindset, time-management skills, and project management abilities. Students will be amazed at what they are capable of! Through this project, seniors will be able to develop working relationships with advisors and topic experts, and practice the skills of a persuasive and confident rhetorician.

The Senior Thesis is intended to be more than just the last requirement of a senior course—the Senior Thesis program is unique in that it goes beyond the experience and the benefit of a single course.

### *The Handbook*

This little handbook is a resource to guide both parents/guardians and students during the academic year. It includes an overview of the program and schedule as well as examples of the kind of work that students can expect to do.

## What is a Senior Thesis?

The Senior Thesis represents the culmination of a student's education. It is a twenty minute presentation, followed by a challenging twenty minutes of question and answer on a controversial and scholarly topic. The Senior Thesis, delivered and defended after final exams in May, is required of all students to graduate. Each thesis must reflect critical thinking skills, in-depth research, excellence in presentation style, and an ability to communicate effectively both from a manuscript and in a give-and-take exchange. Topics vary widely.

Some thesis topics from 2013-2016:

- Frankenfoods: Genetically Modified Organisms and the Future of Food
- Ke Aloha Aina: Native People Struggling in Their Native Lands
- Summa Cum Jobless: The Harmful "College for All" Myth
- iHuman: How Personalized Screen Technologies are Changing Us
- Suicide Gospel: the Influx of Mental Disease in Generation Z
- Don't Hate the Player, Hate the Game: Society's Lack of Intentionality in Romantic Relationships

## **Guidelines for the Senior Theses**

### *Requirements for topic selection:*

- Substantive argument on debatable (controversial) question
- Public issue
- Approved by faculty advisor and rhetoric teacher

### *Unique features of the Senior Thesis process:*

- Each full-time student must complete a Senior Thesis in order to graduate from high school.
- The written format of the thesis must include a bibliography and follow Chicago Manual of Style.
- The thesis is presented in a public forum in front of a panel of four judges. The speech is between 17-22 minutes in length, followed by 20 minutes of question and answer. The Q & A portion carries a great deal of weight in the grading process.
- The students will memorize their speeches and present them without the use of notes. This process reinforces the fourth canon of rhetoric, memoria.
- Students must dress professionally for their thesis presentation.
- Each presentation is videotaped and the taped version, along with the written version, will be kept in the school library.
- Each student is assigned a faculty advisor who assists the student throughout the thesis process. The advisor assists the student by interacting with the research and written work and is a frequent support. The faculty member also helps the student prepare for the question and answer portion that the student will face, and serves on the judging panel.
- Each student must also consult an expert in the field for their topic. Experts in the field must have a qualification or work experience in the area that the student is researching. As part of the class, students will learn how to find these contacts and write professional emails requesting their help and advice.
- Students may wish consider the spiritual aspects of their topics. Some topics naturally lend themselves to a spiritual bent, but others do not.
- A Senior Thesis award is given annually and awarded at the graduation ceremony. The award is determined by instructor, judge and faculty evaluations.

**General Time Frame for the Senior Theses - and Preceding, Formative Papers**

- August-September: discuss topic ideas
- Late September: select topic; receive advisors
- September-October: commence research; thesis statement due, prepare and present initial original oratory speech on topic; research continued
- October-November: begin work on research paper, submit bibliography of at least 10 sources
- December-January: finish writing research paper on topic. Final edits will be due by mid January
- January-March: write thesis, due in parts
- March: submit full thesis and practice presenting as often as possible
- April: finalize draft of full thesis
- April-May: practice giving thesis to classmates; memorize
- Mid-May: thesis presentations

\*This schedule is very general and subject to change at the discretion of the teacher. More specific dates will be assigned annually.

Note: The spring (January through May) is when work on the Senior Thesis really picks up. It requires that students be disciplined managers of their time, and careful planners of their schedules. Please note that teachers of other senior courses are very sensitive to the increased demand of this course, with the goal that the intensity of senior courses lightens in the spring. That said, other course work doesn't come to a halt, and students must manage their time effectively.

## **Format for the Senior Theses**

### Introduction: Exordium ( $\frac{3}{4}$ to 1 page)

#### Goals:

- Introduce the topic
- Capture the audience's attention
- Establish speaker's credibility (by sounding intelligent, offering statistics if desired, not just telling a fun story)

### Statement of case: Narratio (1½ pages)

#### Goals:

- Trace history of topic
- Define important terms

### Outline of parts: Partitio (1-3 sentences)

#### Goals:

- Succinctly outline arguments
- Proper order (generally) is: 2<sup>nd</sup> strongest argument, weakest argument, strongest argument

### Body of speech; the meat of the argument: Confirmatio (3-5 pages)

#### Goals:

- Expound on your arguments (2-4 points as outlined in partitio)
- Offer credible support for each argument

### Addressing the opposition's view: Refutatio (1½ -- 2 pages)

#### Goals:

- Offer opposing view's strongest arguments (no straw men!)
- Capably refute those points
- Include credible support reaffirming your position/attacking opponent's position

### Conclusion: Peroratio ( $\frac{3}{4}$ - 1 page)

#### Goals:

- Reiterate 2-3 main points (briefly, differently than in partitio)
- Offer final emotional, powerful plea (if appropriate)
- Call to action (if appropriate)

The page lengths vary, depending on the speech and the approach the speaker takes. The length of the final thesis is approximately 9-11 pages or 17-22 minutes.

## Faculty Advisors

### *General Information:*

Each student is assigned a faculty advisor to work with the student through the fall and spring. The advisor provides support and accountability to seniors above and beyond what the course instructor can provide. While the rhetoric instructor is the ultimate supervisor of the students and is solely responsible for the academic assessment of the rhetoric students, the demands of the Senior Thesis on the students make it invaluable to provide each student with a personal faculty advisor.

### *What is included in the role of the advisor?*

- Provides guidance as the student narrows the topic to an argument.
- Provides direction and guidance in research questions.
- Assists in source selection and evaluation.
- May provide source suggestions.
- Assesses and evaluates the strength of the thesis and its elements.
- Engages the student in a dialectic toward improving the thesis and its elements.
- Communicates progress and concerns to the course instructor.
- Provides encouragement and support as the student tackles the most difficult academic challenge the student has ever faced!

### *What is not included in the role of the advisor?*

- Grading work.
- Approving thesis.
- Assessing the student's execution of the form of the thesis.

### *Who are the advisors?*

Any faculty member may serve as a faculty advisor. Senior Thesis advising is a significant commitment to meet with the advisee at a number of specific, scheduled meetings throughout the year, as well as additional meetings as each student may need, particularly in the spring.

### *How are advisors chosen or assigned?*

In mid-September, the rhetoric instructor will compile a list of students' Senior Thesis topics. Advisors may indicate interest in particular topics or students, but advisors may or may not be assigned to a student whose topic matches interest or training. As the purpose of the advisor is not to provide expertise in the topic, but to advise and guide through the subject, expertise in the student's area of study is not necessary. The rhetoric instructor then makes the final assignments. The instructor's decision is final.

*How are advisor-advisee meetings arranged?*

Students are responsible to contact advisors to arrange meetings. For each of the meetings required by the course, the student will bring the advisor an *Advisor Meeting* document to fill out. It will state the objective of the meeting and provide a means for easy feedback to the instructor about the meeting, the student's preparedness, and issues or suggestions for their research and progress.

*Advisor-Advisee Required Meetings:*

- September: Meet to discuss topic and thesis statement.
- November: General discussion of the initial speech and the student's provisional position. Recommendations for research.
- January-February: Meetings to discuss items due according to the detailed deadlines. These exchanges may be over email and phone as appropriate, as the student may need opportunities to revise frequently.
- March: Provide student with revision suggestions on the final draft of thesis, eliminate gaps and fallacies, shore up research holes.
- April-May: Listen to the senior present thesis in its entirety and prepare student for question and answer with judges.
- Thesis Week: Sit on the panel of judges for your advisee. The role of the advisor is to be the friendly face on the panel.

## Parental/Guardian Involvement

A note to parents/guardians:

As this is a significant project, and will consume great time and effort during a student's senior year, parents/guardians need to understand what their role is in the process. Please realize that a parent's role will vary based on his or her willingness to be involved and based on the student's willingness for parents/guardians to be involved.

Parents and guardians are exceptional resources and you can be that for your child. Yet at the same time, the thesis experience is an extraordinary opportunity for your child to excel and find a greater level of confidence and independence. Finding that balance between support and release is a life-long parental tightrope.

Dos for parents/guardians:

- Do encourage your child as he or she walks through this process. Research, rewrites, and public speaking can be daunting tasks!
- Do communicate interest in your child's thesis. Do ask questions, have conversations, find out what your child's position is on the subject.
- Do feel free to research and read on your own. This knowledge base will help you have interaction with your child. (Actually learning about the topic is optional, but may help you relate better to your child and understand the final product.)
- Do listen to your child when he or she is practicing for his thesis. Be a willing audience.
- Do try to think of questions for your child that he or she could potentially face from the judges. Discuss possible responses. Even invite friends and/or neighbors over to hear the presentation and have them ply the student with questions afterwards.
- Do communicate with the instructor if you have any concerns or questions.

Don'ts for parents/guardians:

- Don't force your child to choose the topic YOU want. This thesis must be owned by the student. The more they love their topics, the more effective they are in writing, presenting and defending it.
- Don't force your child to take a specific position on the thesis. Feel every freedom to tell your child what side you prefer and why, but allow him or her the right to choose his or her own position.
- Don't do all the research or write the thesis for the student. You may help with the research and you may help with rewrites or even organization. But the thesis is the student's.
- Don't communicate your stress to the student and thus add your fears on to his or her fears. Decompress to someone else (your spouse, your friends, the instructor).