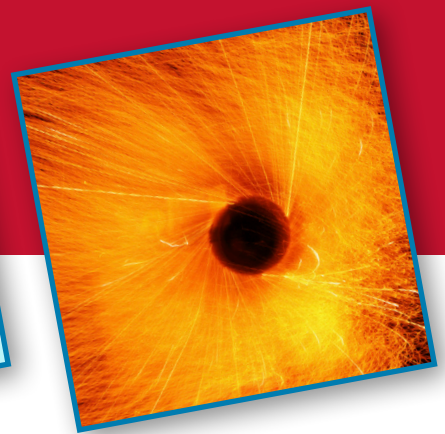
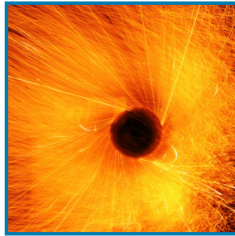


# **Goochland High School Senior Project Program Evaluation**



**Executive Summary  
March 26, 2013**



About the Program

The Senior Project is an instructional program for 12th graders modeled after a design created in Medford, Oregon in 1986. This program was begun at Goochland High School in 2001 by Mrs. Brenda Simms, media specialist. Senior Projects are a type of instructional program that has been recommended to maintain student engagement throughout the senior year of high school, to combat *senioritis*, and to provide students with real-world educational experiences of their own choosing.

Since 2001, the Senior Project has undergone a number of changes and refinements. It is still a graduation requirement in Goochland for all 12th graders.

About This Report

During the 2012-13 school year, I evaluated this instructional program both as an employee of Goochland County Public Schools and as a student in educational leadership through Virginia Commonwealth University. This executive summary communicates my findings, with an emphasis on the data collection that was conducted in Goochland in the winter and spring of 2013.

A companion document will be presented simultaneously to the staff at Goochland High School as a full report, which includes more details about the evaluation design, a literature review, and findings.

About Goochland High School

Goochland High School is a grade 9-12 public high school in Goochland County, Virginia. It currently serves roughly 750 students. It has been accredited by both the Virginia Department of Education and AdvancED. The building makes up roughly one-half of Goochland County’s secondary complex, just 1.5 miles west of Goochland Courthouse. The current building opened in 2001, the same year that saw the introduction of the Senior Project.

About John Hendron

John Hendron began his Virginia career in education as a teacher at Goochland High School in 1999. Today he serves as the division’s supervisor of instructional technology. John holds degrees from the University of Rochester (NY), Case Western Reserve University (OH), Virginia Tech, and is currently enrolled in the Ed.D. in Educational Leadership program at VCU.

Dedication

This study is dedicated to the memory of Mrs. Brenda Simms. She was one of the first people I met who made the instructional team at GHS special back in 1999. She was a true instructional leader in addition to being a supportive, caring individual.

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This study was conducted by **John G. Hendron** as part of EDLP 711 and 713 at Virginia Commonwealth University. I would like to thank the teachers, students, parents and principal at Goochland High School for their cooperation with this program evaluation. Questions about the study may be directed to John at *jbendron@glnd.k12.va.us*.

# Content & Rationale

## In This Report

A *responsive evaluation* can provide stakeholders information about a program as active participants within the program. A *narrative design* to a program evaluation tells a story about what is happening with the program. I chose elements from both evaluation styles when working with the Senior Project team at Goochland High School.

This evaluation was conducted to provide the teachers and administrators at Goochland High School a realistic snapshot of the current state of this instructional program. As changes in the school's personnel at both the teacher and administration levels take place, it is important that the strong elements of this program are maintained. I believe that all of the stakeholders (teachers, principal, students, and parents) worked collectively with this evaluation to proffer an authentic picture of the program with its current design.

For this study, I was guided by a set of three research questions:

- 1. How does the Senior Project contribute towards the success of the senior year experience at GHS?
- 2. Do the project options affect the outcomes for the program?
- 3. Are the program goals being met through the planned activities and outputs?

In attempting to address these questions, I first conducted research through peer-reviewed articles, dissertations, and descriptions of Senior Projects and capstone programs to look at the rationale behind instructional programs similar to Goochland's Senior Project. Then I collected data by interviewing staff at Goochland High School. Next I collected data through survey instruments with current seniors and parents of seniors. Finally, I compiled this data to look for themes and generalized notions about the Senior Project.

This report will present the findings of my data collection in Goochland and conclude with recommendations. I offer the team at Goochland High School my assistance in realizing any of my recommendations or their own as they continue to refine and improve this program.

## What is the Senior Project?

The *Senior Project* in the literature is described as an instructional program that is designed to increase the academic rigor of a student's ultimate year in school. The purposes for doing this include giving students better preparation for their lives after high school, in addition to combatting *senioritis*. Post-high school preparation includes the development of workplace readiness skills (sometimes called 21st Century Skills), time management abilities, and the opportunity to learn more about the working lives of adults in the real world.

When the senior project began in Goochland in the fall of 2001, it was managed by a team which included the senior English teacher, a government teacher, and the school's media specialist. The project at this point included a significant research paper on a topic of the student's choice, which was modeled after research assignments typically required in a student's first year of college. A formal presentation was delivered at the end of the year on the student's findings, which included an artifact the student created to summarize the project's experience. This typically included display boards, maps, or other physical objects students would create. Students were assessed by a panel of educators and volunteers during this final phase of the project.

Today, seniors still complete the senior project, and as it began, it is still a graduation requirement in Goochland. The project no longer is formally graded, however, and the research paper component has been removed. Students now choose from among three distinct options, which include job shadowing, volunteering, or a creative project. No matter which option students choose, they are assigned mentors who are adults who can provide subject-expertise on the project, in addition to checking-in with the student to help them monitor their progress and offer advice. Experiences outside of school are logged by the hour, with a requirement to log at least 30 for the project. Towards the end of the school year, seniors still present a formal summary of their experience, along with a reflection paper. Up to this final component in the program, students are continually meeting with teachers to chart their progress and to receive feedback.

# A Bird's Eye View

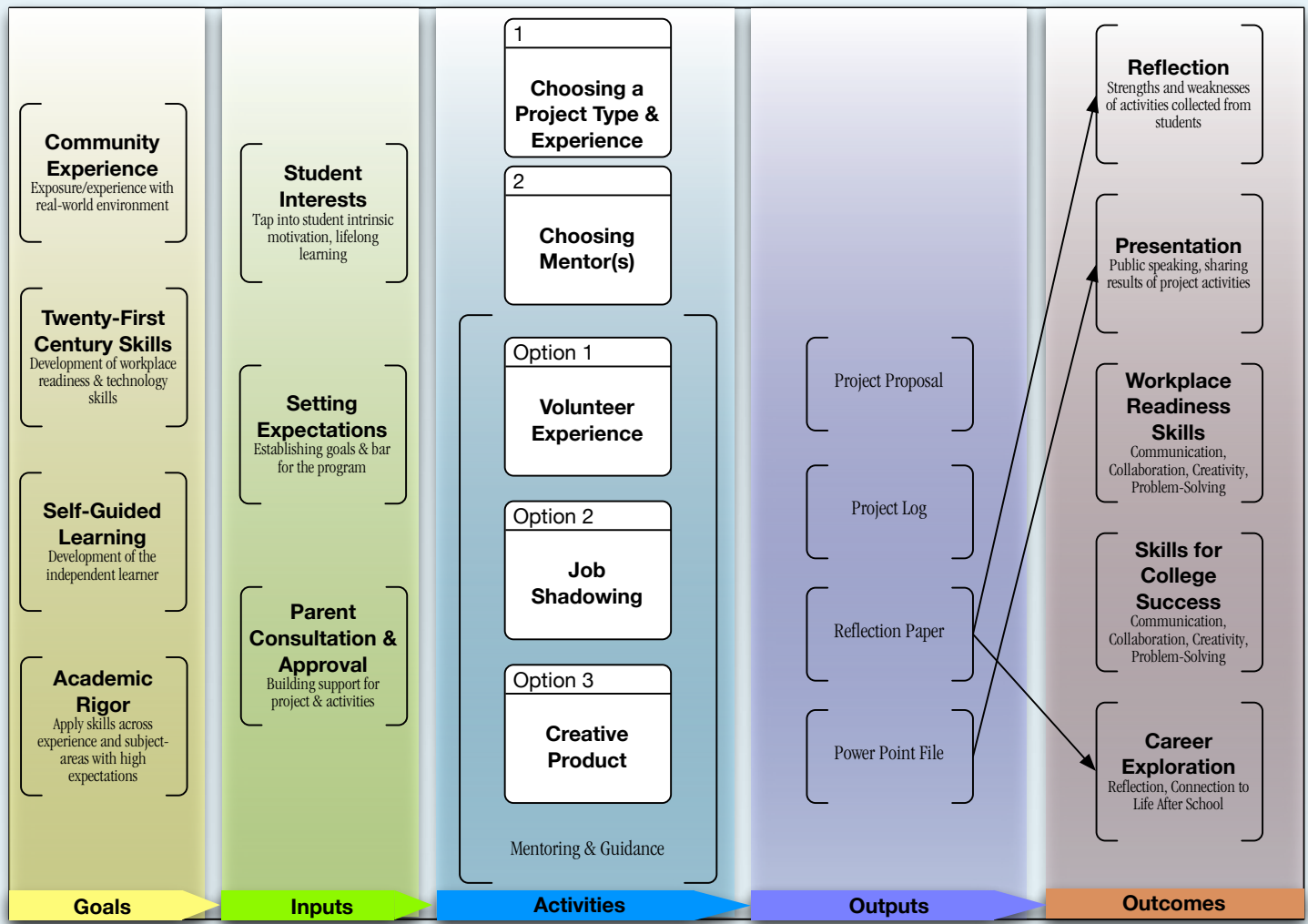


Figure 1: Logic Model of Goochland's Senior Project Program

Figure 1 provides a big picture view of how the Senior Project is designed. In both referring to the literature and talking with Goochland teachers about the program, I came up with the four major goals for the project. A student's own interests are important inputs to the program's direction. Expectations of the program are to be reviewed by parents before any formal work begins. Once the project begins, students have chosen one of three options and work towards securing mentors. Throughout the year, students maintain a project log using *GoogleApps* to report their time spent on the project outside of school.

In coming up with the program's outcomes, the presentation and reflection components were directly related to the formal presentation and the reflection paper. Behind the scenes, however, the outcomes reflect additional goals for the program, which include workplace readiness, college success, and career exploration.

My research with Goochland's teachers revealed that they overwhelmingly want to know if this program delivers on these intended outcomes.



## Results

## Staff Interviews

I conducted interviews with six staff members in February, 2013. In each interview, I asked the same set of questions, from which, six major themes emerged.

**Senior Project as Capstone or Culminating Experience.** This program is viewed as the final hurdle for students before graduation. The Senior Project is viewed as a unique experience that should be reserved for seniors as preparation for life outside of high school.

**Senior Project as Preparation for the Future.** The Senior Project is an opportunity to gain insight into career opportunities, to interface with adults, and to build preparation for further educational opportunities, including college, the military, and trade schools.

**Senior Project as an Opportunity for Personalized Growth.**  
The program is designed to allow students to work independently, to be challenged, and to be inspired by their own interests.

**Senior Project as Community Relationship Builder.** Because the Project includes mentorship from subject experts and interested adults, students all begin to forge relationships with community members outside of school. Teachers view this opportunity as a dual benefit: it helps students develop skills that otherwise might not be covered in the curriculum, and it reflects positively on the school based on the impression community members derive through student interactions.

**Supervision of the Senior Project.** There is some concern by some staff that the oversight on student progress in the project might be better managed, so that students are held accountable for the responsibilities required for the project. There was not, however, consensus on how to solve the accountability issue.

**Parental Involvement with the Senior Project.** There is a feeling that parents are not intimately involved in the Senior Project. Staff would welcome further participation, such as attending the student presentations at the conclusion of the school year. It was

noted by two teachers that when it is evident that parents are involved deeply, it is personally touching to witness the parent-student collaboration. Recent efforts to include parents in the process have included sending invitations to the presentations in the spring.

A summary of the staff interviews appear in Figures 2-9.

## Student Feedback

I had the opportunity to visit Goochland High School and collected survey data from 81 students in February, 2013. At this stage, some students had nearly completed their project work, and some were “just getting started,” to quote one teacher. Projects are finalized through the presentations and reflection papers in May.

I asked two open-ended questions in the survey. One asked about teacher support, and overwhelmingly, students felt that their teachers supported their efforts with the Senior Project. The second question centered around “improvements” to the project, and responses revolved around several distinct themes (Figure 10).

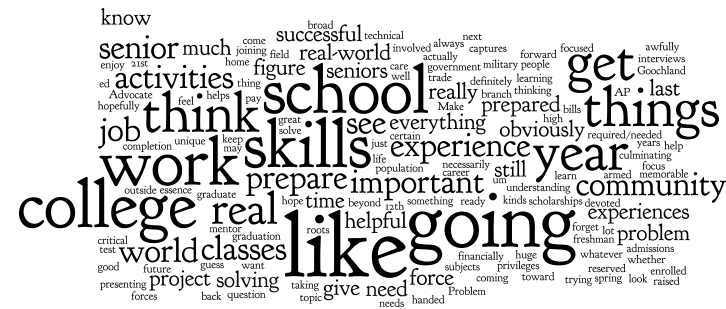
**Figure 10:**  
Summary of Student Responses on Senior Project Improvement (number of responses articulating theme)

Our workload should be reduced.	12
The Senior Project should be eliminated.	12
I'm confused about what I'm supposed to be doing.	5
The mentor component needs improvement.	3
Make the project more student-centered.	2
We need reminders of what things are due.	2
The project should be more college relevant.	1
Class time should be provided for the project.	1

I also polled students on their post-high school plans. While the project is designed, according to teachers, for all post-high school pursuits, knowing where students are headed may be helpful.

**Figure 11:**  
Summary of Student Post-High School Plans

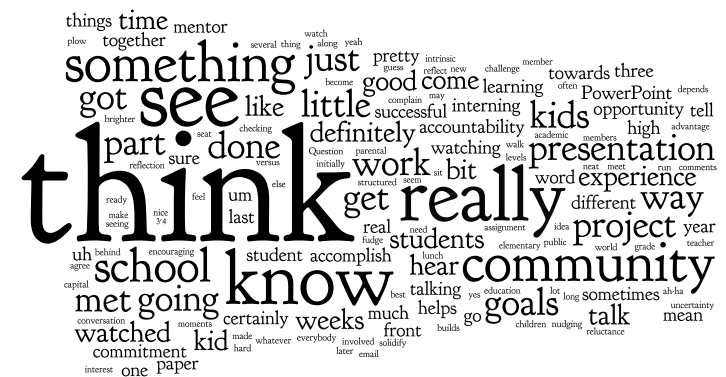
I plan to go to college.	86%
I plan to work.	9%
I plan to join the military.	5%



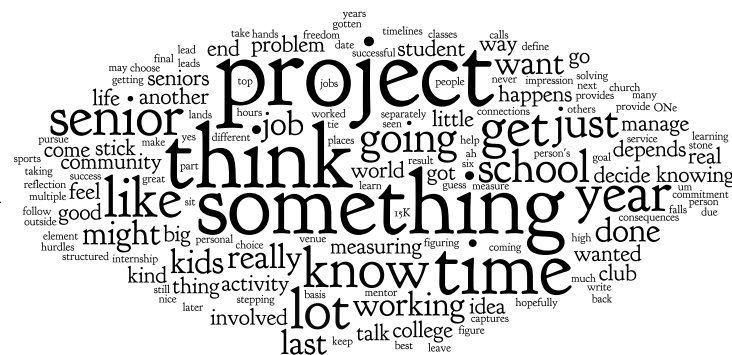
**Figure 2:** *What makes for a successful senior year?*



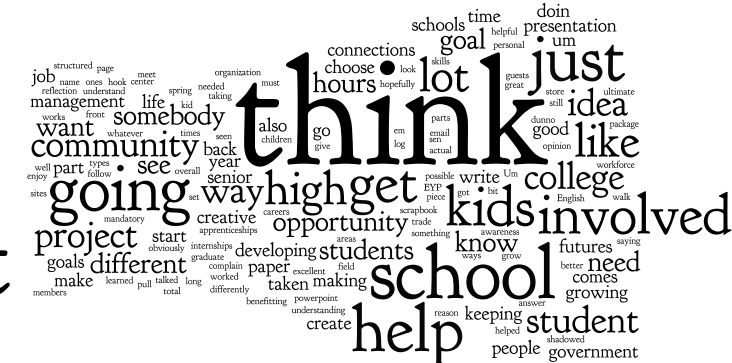
**Figure 4:** How do the different project options (volunteering, shadowing, creative project) affect the project outcomes?



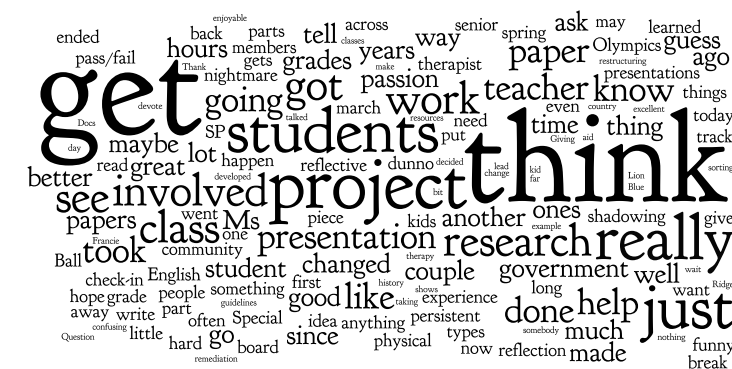
**Figure 6:** Are your goals being met through the planned activities and outputs in the program?



**Figure 3:** How does the Senior Project contribute towards a successful senior year?



**Figure 5:** *What are the goals for this instructional program?*



**Figure 7:** What has gone particularly well with the senior project in recent years?





# Implications

There are a number of disconnects between the data collected from staff, students, and parents.

**1. The purpose and goals behind the program.** Not all students felt like they knew why they participate in the Senior Project, and among teachers, consistent answers for the rationale behind the project were not found. The parent comment from the preceding section acknowledges the disconnect behind the project's existence in the minds of all students. The parent survey data indicates that the goals are not well-known.

**2. Is the Senior Project a rigorous academic endeavor?** While the literature often cites Senior Projects as type of rigorous academic experience, I have questions of whether or not it belongs as a goal for the program given the data I collected. Students did not feel the project significantly challenged them, aside complaints about the time commitments. The limited parent data does not indicate that the Senior Project “challenges” students “academically.”

**3. Students gave positive feedback on their project option,** the support they receive from teachers, and having a set of positive experiences. The amount of positive feedback in these areas was not reflected in all the parent surveys.

**4. Not everyone agrees the Senior Project is a capstone experience.** Despite being designed as a “capstone” experience, students did not feel they were asked to apply a diverse set of previously-learned skills, nor did they feel it summed-up their high school experience.

**5. The Senior Project succeeds at allowing students to create their own, customized experiences for the project.** Despite this hallmark, the responses from parents did not value the continuation of the project. I will note again that parental data should have a higher response rate to be logically compared to the student data.

**6. There are doubts that the Senior Project prepares students for life after school.** Overall, students were not convinced; they also have not yet left high school or graduated. Among the teachers, despite designing the program to prepare students for

the worlds of work, military service, and college life, there was significant doubt from teachers as to whether or not this project was making a lasting impact on preparing students for life after high school. The lack of data or reflection after high school was a major factor in this doubt, despite several anecdotal stories from returning students that the program had helped them score an internship, job, or scholarship opportunity.

There were also some consistencies that are worth noting from the data between students and teachers.

**1. The mentorship requirement is viewed as a positive aspect of the program.** While some data from both students and parents suggest that improvements to the mentor selection process are warranted, the requirement of mentors is a hallmark of the program. Mentors can provide students with content knowledge that otherwise could not be found within the school environment. Mentors can also provide feedback on student progress that is honest and authentic, outside the school's academic environment.

**2. The teachers overseeing the Senior Project are enthusiastic about the program's success.** Teachers want this to work and want to authentically challenge students with real world learning opportunities that otherwise could not be obtained within the school building.

**3. The teachers have indicated that they read each and every reflection paper and are willing to change the program based on this student feedback.** Major changes have already been made since the program's inception.

**4. A common theme from the teachers was a goal of having students become better problem-solvers and critical thinkers.** The staff at Goochland High School should consider this as one of the program's primary goals.

# Vignettes

From my interviews, discussions, and research into the Senior Project, I ran across several stories or quotes that tell a significant portion of this instructional program's story.



*“the senior project ought to be something that captures the essence of school and some activities that are reserved for 12<sup>th</sup> graders...”*  
*“That when teachers ‘get out of the way,’ students can surprise with their investment in a project... That seventeen- and eighteen-year-olds can speak knowledgeably to strangers about topics that interest them...”*

*“this is getting them ready for the field of work, job interviews, or with panels, for scholarships, admissions to college, real-world skills, we'd like to call them twenty-first century skills...”*



*“I would like some input from the parents, but also the seniors, looking back over high school, was this something that helped them, or not; was it their job shadowing, did it help them later in life? An impression on the community?”*

*“the project is something that has an element of service to it, something that might lead to a community activity... what I've seen is that they are learning things in the places that they are working and making an impression on the community.”*

*“Some kids really take ownership of it and really get into it, and have a passion that they have or have developed... we had a kid a couple of years ago who was looking for something and decided to volunteer for Special Olympics and didn't think he'd get anything out of it. He was blown away from the experience, and today, he's still involved with Special Olympics. So there are some kids who really, I dunno, really get it.”*





# Recommendations

The purpose behind this evaluation was to provide a snapshot of the current implementation of the Senior Project at Goochland High School. No action is required based upon the findings from data, but I hope that the staff at GHS takes what was learned as the start of the next refinement process, in conjunction with this school year’s student reflection papers.

The following recommendations are based upon several factors, including the research I conducted on senior projects, the data collected at Goochland High School, and my opinion and role as an educator in Goochland.

**1. Continue the Senior Project at Goochland High School.**

While *graduation projects*, *capstone projects*, or *senior projects* are required in high schools in other parts of the U.S., they are not found in every school in Virginia. This project sets the curriculum and learning opportunities in Goochland apart in the region, and should be continued as an innovative instructional program.

**2. Increase the visibility of the program to all stakeholders.**

Being a special instructional program, there is not adequate recognition of the project in school documentation, websites, or the Division curriculum. The program, its goals, and other elements articulated in Figure 1 (logic model) should be included on the school’s website, student handbook, and curriculum guides.

You can also showcase projects through the artifacts of final presentations online for viewing by future seniors.

**3. Work on better accountability of student participation in the program.**

This was voiced as a concern by teachers, and an acknowledgement from a parent echoed the sentiment that not all students take the challenge seriously or with equal effort. I believe better visibility will help in this area, with support from families, if they understand the purpose behind the program.

**4. Expand the program by offering capstone experiences at grades 5 and grade 8 within the Division.**

The division should work towards developing similar capstone experiences that play off of student interest during the 5th and 8th grade years. This experience will no doubt better prepare high school students by the 12th grade.

**5. Evaluate individual mentors on their performance.**

Along with trying to expand the mentor pool, record keeping by teachers should include feedback from students on a mentor’s ability to as-

sist during the program, if it is not already done.

**6. Consider if the goal of “academic rigor” is still reflected in the program’s activities.**

Without the formal research paper, you may choose to re-articulate one of the program’s goals as “to increase student capacity for critical thinking and problem solving.” These skills emerged during the interviews with staff.

**7. Build a reporting mechanism to receive feedback at 1-3 year intervals from graduates.**

By first alerting students, then by collecting a lot of contact information (home phone number, cell phone number, e-mail address, Facebook page, Twitter account, etc.), students in a statistics or other class at GHS could be held responsible for collecting data from past graduates up to three years after graduation. This information can be shared to better assess the effectiveness of the program, and to track student behaviors post graduation.

**8. Compare your project with those in different locales.**

While site visits can be expensive, consider chatting with other teachers or administrators in Senior Project schools across the country on how they run their programs using Skype® or other VoIP tools. Specifically, share the strengths of your programs, and how your activities align with the program’s goals. This may also open the opportunity for group projects that span across state lines.

**9. Continue this evaluation!**

Use the meetings with students throughout the year to continue to collect data on the program’s successes. Given more time, I would recommend collecting a richer sample from parents, in addition to interviews with a random sampling of students on their experiences. Using data from graduated students will also contribute to telling the story about Goochland High School’s Senior Project.





This document was prepared for the staff of Goochland High School. If this document appears online, it is because I have the permission of Goochland County Public Schools to share the details held within.

This document was created using Adobe InDesign CS5 on Macintosh OS X. Figure graphics were created using Wordle ([www.wordle.net](http://www.wordle.net)) and Apple Keynote presentation software. Fonts used include Helvetica Neue Bold and ITC Garamond Condensed.

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