

The Senior Comps

A Saint Mary's Capstone Experience

By Shannon E. Brewer Rooney '03



Kiera Johnsen '16 grew up watching the news with her parents every night and the headline show *60 Minutes* every Sunday. A communication studies and political science double major from Costa Mesa, CA, Johnsen remains fascinated by the role the media plays in politics.

"Many news stories broken by *60 Minutes* and other outlets have become catalysts for change in our society. I came to realize how powerful the media is, how it influences society...It made me want a career which was either a part of or influential on the political process, whether through directly working in public policy or as a news producer or journalist," says Johnsen. That led her to her double major and its upcoming culmination in her senior comprehensive project.

A rising senior, Johnsen will complete her senior comprehensive, or "senior comp," in communications studies. According to the College Bulletin, her major requires that she complete this senior capstone experience in "one of two sequences of courses reflecting the main intellectual traditions of the communication discipline: 1) research methods, which explores social-scientific and qualitative methods of inquiry, or 2) rhetorical criticism, focusing on the critical analysis of all types of public communication." Johnsen chose the former and is embarking on a research project that investigates the ways in which Internet media sites like BuzzFeed impact young voters.

That's how a random perusal of a BuzzFeed article became the topic of Johnsen's senior comprehensive research project. Through the project, she will not only satisfy her own curiosity, she will demonstrate her ability to apply both qualitative and quantitative research skills as well as her capabilities as a writer and critical thinker.

The College Bulletin, a detailed outline of majors and minors and their requirements, makes mention of a senior thesis as early as the 1929-30 academic year. Throughout Saint Mary's history, this "thesis" has developed from a traditional exam or term paper to the individualized experience it is today. However, since the College's early history, the senior thesis, now senior comp, has always required students to apply the concepts they've learned in their major area of study and demonstrate their ability to use that knowledge practically. That goal hasn't changed.

"Over the years the format of the senior comprehensives has changed as the goals and outcomes for the majors have evolved," says Susan Vanek '70, associate dean for advising in Academic Affairs and First Year Studies. "In all cases, the senior comprehensive is considered a capstone experience. At the end of their major, students apply their critical thinking and communicative skills to demonstrate a deeper understanding of their major."

Vanek, an alumna who completed a Spanish major, recalls writing a long research paper and taking an oral exam as part of her own senior comp experience. "When my classmates and I were first-year students, upper-class students told us not to worry about the senior comprehensive because it would be eliminated by the time we were seniors. At the time I thought it would be great to have one less graduation requirement. In retrospect, however, I realize that the knowledge and skills I gained from this experience were important. I am glad to see that the senior comprehensive continues to be a valuable part of a Saint Mary's education."

Senior comp requirements vary according to major, but all involve practical application of a student's knowledge, writing abilities, and research and critical thinking. For example, an education major is required to complete her student teaching as well

as a comprehensive teaching portfolio including unit and lesson plans. The education major is demonstrating her knowledge, in addition to gaining valuable hands-on teaching experience. She'll also leave Saint Mary's with the portfolio, which contains materials she can put to use in her first year of teaching after graduation.

Throughout their coursework, nursing majors complete valuable clinical experience in hospitals, long-term care facilities, health departments, and community settings under the supervision of qualified faculty members. The capstone experience is an exam during the final semester of their senior year. The exam serves as the nursing senior comp. It is computer-based, simulating the NCLEX-RN, the National Council Licensure Examination for registered nurses.

A religious studies major takes a two-part exam consisting of three open-source essays each. The College Bulletin explains: "The exam tests the student's breadth of knowledge in religious studies and her facility in theological reflection. One part covers historical materials, texts, and issues...the second examines contemporary sources..." Students prepare their bibliography in consultation with their academic advisor and then work with two members of the religious studies faculty to discuss the texts and prepare their responses.

Students in most majors work individually with a faculty advisor, whether their comp features an exam, research paper, or other project. Chemistry major Jennifer Connell '16 is conducting the research for her senior comp this summer. Connell's project is titled "Detecting Methylated versus Unmethylated DNA using Ultra High Performance Liquid Chromatography-Mass

Spectrometry." It involves extracting plant DNA in order to explain physical changes caused by different amounts of fertilizer.

Her faculty advisor, chemistry professor Kathryn Haas, has been a valued influence throughout the experience. "Professor Haas has been there to celebrate the small victories I have experienced in research and has guided me through the problem solving," says Connell, a rising senior from Grand Rapids, MI. "She has given me constructive feedback on the writing I have done for this project and overall has been a wonderful source of guidance throughout the experience."

Natasha Flores '12, recently left her position as chief operating officer at Janus Motorcycles in Goshen, IN, to teach math and coach soccer in the Goshen Community Schools. She is also working on her master's in business administration in a program with Arizona State University. As a Saint Mary's senior Flores studied the mathematics behind climate change. A problem-solver by nature, Flores says, "I have a desire to make the environment better for all future generations that will live on this planet. I believe the best place to start is understanding what the problem is and define the variables we can change to fix the issues." Her senior comp was a natural expression of her passion for sustainability and her mathematical approach.

Much of Flores' project involved deriving the equations that drive climate studies today. The academic research experience proved useful as she went on to pursue her master's of science in engineering, science, and technology entrepreneurship at the University of Notre Dame. In fact, her investigative and problem-solving skills prove useful every day. "I apply [them] in my professional life by constantly digging deeper in all subjects. When there is a problem at work, I do all research possible. After that I try to find a solution and determine the best way to clearly present it to my boss/team," says Flores. The lessons she learn while completing the senior comp stay with her today. "It taught me about the subject and about my abilities. I learned a lot about who I am and what I want to do in the future," she says.

As Johnsen works to complete the research for her comp on media impact on voters, she says she is gaining a greater appreciation for and perspective on how much work goes into the entire process. "This process, while long and stressful, excites me because I'm working on a topic I love. It is something I find really fascinating and really am passionate about. I am so excited to discover what the results will be and to present my work in December," says Johnsen. She has learned an important life lesson too. "This entire senior comp process validates the idea that some of the greatest rewards come from things that are difficult." In the completion of the senior comp, Johnsen and each Saint Mary's senior prepare for a career and a life that makes a positive difference in the world. They learn valuable critical thinking skills, collaboration, and problem-solving. And, along the way, they complete a process—be it research, writing, presenting, teaching, or testing—that also leads to self discovery. **C**

Senior comp topics are as varied as our more than 30 College majors. Some current and past projects include:

- *The Effect of Media Exposure on Attitudes about Individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder (psychology)*
- *The Goldilocks Effect: What Concentration of Linalool is the Most Effective for Attracting Pollinators to *Hesperis matronalis*? (biology)*
- *Femininity through the perception of appearance and gender roles (studio art)*
- *Attacking Masculinity: An Examination of Hegemonic Masculinity in Two Television Series (sociology)*
- *A Survey on the Quality and Benefits of an Older Adult Guardianship Program (social work)*
- *The Effects of International Monetary Fund Loans: Gross National Product and Inequality (political science)*