Dear Seniors,

Our experience tells us that senior year at “K” is a particularly challenging time. There are many demands – SIPs, Comps, tough classes in your major, decisions about the next step in your life -- and significant stress associated with each. A recent focus group of seniors reported that the SIP seems to be the source of the greatest stress.

Those seniors indicated that the students who come back from study abroad junior spring often struggle with re-adjusting to life in the U.S., re-integrating into the “K” community and culture, and planning effectively for their SIPs. Those seniors recommend that any “jump” you can get on your SIP earlier than junior spring is very helpful.

After listening to the focus discussions, the conveners of the focus group concluded that seniors would be in a better position if they viewed the SIP as a learning process, not the culmination of all of their academic effort at “K.” Engaging in the process and learning from mistakes is as important, if not more, than the eventual product. The process allows you to develop your academic skills – they advise that you do so in a way that is as healthy emotionally as possible.

The conveners also suggested that we get bracelets that read “I am not my SIP” to give to seniors – we plan to do so. They emphasized that it’s important to have realistic, even moderate, expectations of the SIP experience and to feel good about yourself for engaging in this first major (as in huge) independent project.

The seniors reported that the SIP experience is tough on friendship groups, especially with housemates. People feel quite vulnerable about their SIPs and how far they are in completing their work and tend to compare themselves with others’ progress, and withdraw, get irritable, or feel down. The seniors emphasized the importance of communicating as clearly as you can to your housemates about what you need at any point in the process and to make sure you get enough sleep!

SIP advisors and other students in your major can provide invaluable help. It’s very important to rope your advisor in early in the process and try to develop a clear contract or plan for your SIP work. A plan that is based on realistic deadlines for “chunks” of work and that involves regular meetings (weekly, if possible) with your SIP advisor makes a significant difference.

The conveners hoped we could help students “develop solidarity among those struggling.” The focus group members reported that peer support and editing helps a great deal. They suggested that we form SIP learning groups that would serve both functions.

The conveners also hoped that we would advise you to go to the Counseling Center when you’re blocked, stuck, fearful about your SIP and your usual ways to approach academic work are not being effective.

The last advice of the seniors was: “Seek out resources. Hold yourself accountable. Don’t freak out.” The vast majority of seniors do finish their SIPs – the main question is how hard the process is.

Another major part of senior year is figuring out what you’ll do after graduation. For many students, taking a year off to sort through and integrate all of their experiences is the most reasonable next step. As exciting as it is to graduate from college, we know that there is also a lot of stress involved. There is the stress of finishing up, of preparing to leave your friends and other important people at “K,” and of relocating to do whatever is next. The W Curve that we focused on for Study Abroad may also be useful.

Many students report knowing that they have a lot of feelings about themselves, graduation, their time here, their work, their friends, and their experiences. It is a lot to integrate. As you move toward that process, please touch your feelings lightly. Let yourself soften to them as you observe or recall them. Trust that your experiences here will get clearer, but it takes time. Be patient with yourself.