

Capstone Student Handbook

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What is the Senior Capstone?

The Capstone Course

All Capstone courses are 6 credit hours, although some Capstones will be offered for one term only, while others will continue for two or three terms. In addition, all Capstone courses will

- ◆ Provide an opportunity for students to apply the expertise they have learned in the major and in University Studies to real issues and problems in the community.
- ◆ Enhance students' ability to work in a team context necessitating collaboration with persons from different fields of specialization.
- ◆ Encourage active involvement in the community.

AS A RESULT

In light of the above Capstone objectives, you will most likely be working within some collaborative context with others from various majors. Depending on the Capstone experience, you may be asked to critically assess aspects of the expertise gained from your major in order to suggest ways that you will contribute to the Capstone project. You will probably be relied upon as a contributing member of a team working toward a goal that meets a real need as defined by students, faculty, and community agency.

Senior Capstone: An Integral component of the University Studies Program

As an integral component of the PSU University Studies Program, each Capstone results in some form

of summation, closing project, or final product that puts closure to the students' experience. Although each Capstone is unique in terms of community-based objectives and outcomes, every Capstone includes goals that are congruent with goals in the University Studies program, including improvement in students' ability to communicate effectively, think critically, work in a diverse society, and act in socially responsible ways.

AS A RESULT

Although each Capstone course is unique, you will probably sense the relationship between (1) the ways that your faculty member and community partner have conceptualized the course, and (2) the goals of the University Studies Program.

For example, many Capstones contain projects that require significant oral presentation work or written report summaries. Often Capstone students are interacting with individuals or groups that they may not have come in contact with before. An additional aspect of many Capstone courses is the relative autonomy students have in determining many aspects of the community partnership and project outcomes.

Related information: See "Working in Groups"; "Was I Making a Difference?"; "Encountering Differences"; and "Quick Strategies for Team Process" on the Web at Capstone Handbook: Additional Ideas for Students (www.cae.pdx.edu/capstu-ideas.html)

Successful completion of the Capstone requirement: Common questions

If I am taking a Capstone that lasts for more than one term, will I get a grade for that term on my transcript?

If you are in a Capstone course that continues for more than one term, (for example, 3 credits for two consecutive terms), you may receive an “IP” grade on your grade report after the first term of the course. The “IP” grade, which stands for “in-progress,” will be changed by your course faculty into a letter grade after you have completed the entire 6 credits. The letter grade assigned to you will then appear on your transcript for each term that you took the Capstone course.

Why can't I complete three credit hours in this Capstone and three credits in another Capstone?

Two reasons: First, PSU is committed to helping its students obtain full benefit from the unique opportunities Capstone courses can provide. Second, your community partners expect a reasonable level of commitment and responsibility toward the partnership. Therefore, all students are expected to complete 6 credits within the same Capstone course. This means that, by deciding to stay in this course, you are making a commitment to complete the entire course sequence for Capstones lasting one, two, or three consecutive quarters. If you decide to withdraw from the experience at any time before the 6 credits are complete, you will not receive

credit for any portion of that experience. Instead, you will have to enroll for another 6 credit hours with another Capstone course.

I am already taking a full course load and working outside of school. Is this course going to take a lot of my time?

Capstone courses are six-credit courses, and so the work load is obviously greater than that required of a 3 or 4-credit course. A reasonable expectation is that one Capstone course would require about as much work as two 3-credit courses, or one and one-half 4-credit courses. One reason that the Capstone might seem like it takes more time is the nature of the work involved. In other courses, you might be able to squeeze course-work in whenever and wherever you choose, and on your own time. In the Capstone, you will often need to coordinate schedules with other students and with the community partners. Students have reported that planning ahead, realistically assessing the project time commitment, and maintaining a somewhat lighter course load during the Capstone term(s) are all strategies that have helped to address time and schedule concerns during the Capstone.

Can the Capstone be waived for any reason? Where can I go to find out more information about Capstone requirements?

Beginning in 1994, PSU implemented the University Studies program that includes the Capstone as a requirement for graduation for all students. As a graduation

requirement, the Capstone cannot be waived. To find out if this requirement pertains to you, or for any other advising questions regarding Capstone, see your departmental adviser or contact Information and Academic Support Center (IASC), 425 SMSU, 503-725-4005. You will be able to speak with an IASC staff member about advising questions regarding Capstone requirements.

Ensuring a safe and productive Capstone

PSU students come into Capstone courses with a wealth of work, professional, and community experience. Most PSU students are well aware of issues regarding health and safety when encountering unfamiliar environments, but that does not guarantee safety in the community. The following reminders relate especially to the experience of volunteering one's time in the community:

- ◆ **Plan ahead for the additional time commitment.** One of the reasons why you might seem “busier” during the Capstone term is that you will probably be coordinating schedules with other students, as well the community agency. Planning ahead for this addition to your schedule may alleviate some stress and allow you to concentrate more fully on balancing other aspects of your schedule. See the ideas on “Time and Stress” on the Web at Capstone Handbook: Additional Ideas for Students (www.cae.pdx.edu/capstu-ideas.html).
- ◆ **Ensure a safe working environment.** This could include awareness of lighting and posture while working, as well as looking carefully at the working environment to eliminate hazards. It also includes planning ahead for safe transportation. For example, if you are concerned about your knowledge of the area or your ability to find the places you will need to go, begin asking questions and making arrangements with your peers, faculty, or community partner as soon as possible. *If you ever arrive at a site and do not feel safe for any reason, leave immediately. Contact your course faculty and discuss your concerns.*
- ◆ **Second, ensuring a safe and productive working environment means anticipating risk.** What behaviors fall outside your job description—for example, meeting with a client may be within your job description; transporting them in your car is not. Thinking ahead and asking these kinds of important questions reduces your risk and demonstrates the seriousness with which you approach the partnership. Finally, you have the right to adequate supervision, feedback from supervisors, and to a reasonably safe, harassment-free working environment. Sexual harassment comes in many forms, but it is typically the use of power or authority by one person to pressure another person into accepting verbal, physical, or sexual conduct. If

you feel uncomfortable in this way, or if you feel uncomfortable about any aspect of your work with others during your Capstone, talk to someone who can be helpful to you such as your faculty member or university professionals.

- ◆ **Know the policies and procedures for a health or safety emergency.** Most agencies have specific policies for emergencies and are glad to outline those procedures to volunteers.
- ◆ **Plan ahead for health care.** Students enrolled for 9 or more credit hours are automatically covered by the university basic health plan (summer session excluded). Students enrolled for 4 to 8 credits can pay a health fee for the basic plan during the first two weeks of the term only. Because the basic health plan is limited, students may want to look into the extended health plan which can be purchased during the first two weeks of the term. Call the Center for Student Health and Counseling at 503-725-2800 for more information.

Student liability insurance

PSU students are not covered by the State Insurance Fund for claims arising against students for their actions performed during the Capstone. Therefore, the State Attorney General's Office has strongly recommended that PSU take steps to provide students with liability insurance coverage. All Capstone students are automatically assessed a

one-time fee of \$20. This fee will be applied toward liability coverage for the entire duration of the Capstone experience. Additional information can be obtained by contacting Janelle Voegele at 503-725-8341.

Student safety in the community

Capstone policy on use of community partner agency vehicles

Vehicles belonging to community partner agencies can be lent to Capstone student volunteers only if the following conditions are met: (1) the community partner agency possesses insurance covering volunteer drivers; (2) the student driver has signed community partner agency paperwork certifying that they are a volunteer; and (3) the student possesses the minimum automobile insurance required by the State of Oregon.

Capstone policy on transportation and liability

The State of Oregon and Portland State University, together with their agents, officers, employees and volunteers, are not liable for personal injury or property damage resulting from group or individual travel to or from activities related to participation in Senior Capstone. Students who are driving should possess a valid driver's license and driver's insurance for the duration of their Capstone.

General safety

- ◆ In cases where students are interacting directly with community members as part of their Capstone

service work, students should not enter community members' private homes/residences under any circumstances.

◆ Be clear about the parameters of your service responsibilities.

Requests made of you throughout your Capstone should be limited to actions that directly pertain to your agreed-to service and academic responsibilities. Examples of inappropriate requests (outside of agreed-to responsibilities) include, but are not limited to: requests for personal favors, requests for loan of an automobile or other personal property items, invitations to social events not related to Capstone responsibilities, and requests for additional work or service hours above those that are required to complete the service portion of the course.

◆ Clarify any questions that arise during your orientation to the community/agency population.

◆ Use the following checklist to explore any remaining questions with your faculty member and/or community partner.

Student responsibility in community-based learning

I. Students should clearly understand the requirements of their community project:

- I have a clear understanding of both my instructor's and my community partner's expectations of me.
- I understand my parameters (I have thought of the consequences of performing actions beyond my agreed responsibilities).

- I have identified the skills needed to carry out this project, and I feel comfortable with those skills.
- I have identified the skills needed to carry out this project, and I have devised specific plans for strengthening skills with which I am not comfortable or familiar.
- I know my client population (I am making every attempt to understand their needs from their perspective).
- I know what to do in case of an emergency.

II. Students need necessary legal documents:

- If I will be driving, I have a valid license and liability insurance.

III. Students should take responsibility for their behavior throughout the community-based project:

- I understand that I am responsible for my own personal health and safety.
- I have insurance (if agency requires specific coverage for volunteers).
- I understand the waivers I sign.
- I have thought of risks involved in this community-based project.

For example:

- ◆ *What are clients' special needs?*
- ◆ *In case of accidents, what is unsafe?*
- ◆ *What can I do to reduce risks by my own behavior, clothing, preparation?*
- ◆ *What behaviors fall outside of my job description? (Example: Is it OK to transport clients?)*

Three legal issues to be aware of throughout your Capstone:

1. *Negligence involves a mistake, lack of attention, reckless behavior, or indifference to the duty of care of another person.* A reasonable person should have been able to foresee the

possibility of injury. (Example: wet spot on floor, child climbing on balance beam.)

2. Intentional misconduct or criminal misconduct involves potential harm caused by a volunteer. A

volunteer is responsible for any harm caused to an organization or individual if the harm resulted from intentional or criminal misconduct on the part of the volunteer.

3. Invasion of privacy involves confidentiality. Follow the confidentiality policies of the agency. If they do not clearly inform you of the policy *ask them* for their policy guidelines regarding this. (Example: client histories and personal records are confidential.)

Four helpful components of community-based projects

1. Job description (explanation of duties/responsibilities)
2. Training (knowledge of procedures)
3. Tools to do the job required (appropriate technology, space, etc.)
4. Supervision (feedback from instructor and community partner)

Encountering difficulties

“Going through problems together in the Capstone was different from most of my other classes where you could just let it go and forget about it when the term ends. In my opinion, [the Capstone] was a lot more like life in general—you have to really work at it. No one’s going to want you around for long if you can’t work with other people through your difficulties.”

-Capstone senior

The Capstone experience offers several opportunities for personal and professional growth. Occasionally, those opportunities for growth occur in the form of challenges . . . times of frustration that may not feel like “potential for growth” at the time! The following are recommended steps to follow if you are encountering difficulties that threaten to impede your Capstone goals:

1. Work with your peers to generate solutions whenever possible.

Define (or remind yourselves) of your “common goal(s)”: what is everyone working toward? Respect (really listen to) different opinions and consider whether there may be more than one route to your “common goal(s).” Although it may seem difficult, ask yourself, “What might this person see that I don’t?” Finally, be clear and specific without blaming (see guidelines for working in groups and for giving feedback) and make sure everyone clarifies exactly what he or she agreed to do to work toward an acceptable solution.

2. If the above does not work, don’t wait—speak with your faculty member.

Ideally everyone involved should be in on the conversation so that the situation is not made worse if one or two people feel “out of the loop.” It may also be appropriate to seek feedback from your community partner, but your Capstone faculty should be kept aware of major impediments to reaching a solution.

3. *If you and/or your Capstone peers have tried your best to work with everyone involved and are still encountering unworkable barriers, you can contact Janelle Voegele at 503-725-8341 or voegelej@pdx.edu.* Janelle works to support students, faculty, and graduate assistants as they encounter challenges related to their Capstone work.

Working with the Community Partner

General guidelines

As you begin your relationship with your community organization, you will probably be eager to get involved make a difference in the lives of people and in the agencies with which you serve. As representatives of PSU, your actions set the tone for an ongoing community/university partnership of which you are an integral part. Although the following guidelines might seem obvious to you, we include them as reminders because they have often distinguished productive and successful Capstone experiences from those which were less successful:

ASK FOR HELP WHEN IN DOUBT

Your peers, faculty, community partner, and PSU Capstone support staff can assist you in determining appropriate ways to respond in difficult situations.

BE PUNCTUAL AND RESPONSIBLE

Even though you are volunteering your time, your community partners need to be able to rely on your commitment and punctuality over

the entire course of the Capstone experience.

RESPECT THE PRIVACY OF ALL CLIENTS

In the course of your project, you may have access to confidential information. Confidential information can include organizational files, organizational projects in progress, and even clients' personal stories. It is vital that you treat confidential information as privileged, and if you are not certain whether or not some piece of information is to be treated as confidential, *ask*.

CALL IF YOU ANTICIPATE LATENESS OR ABSENCE

Your faculty, student team, and community partners will expect follow-through on any commitments you have made and will be at a loss if you don't. Keep them informed of conflicts.

BE AWARE

We all understand that conventions for appropriate dress, verbal and nonverbal communication, and rules for appropriate behavior vary across various communities and organizations. You might not always feel comfortable or always agree with every aspect of your community project. However, maintaining a high level of awareness of your surroundings and, when appropriate, adapting to those surroundings demonstrates respect for those with whom you work.

BE FLEXIBLE

The level or intensity of activity within a community project is not always predictable. Your flexibility to changing situations assists the

project to run more smoothly for everyone involved.

Communicating in a group

All of us have had productive and not-so-productive experiences working in groups. Since the success of many Capstone projects depends upon the quality of interaction within the Capstone teams, we have included some timely reminders about group process and dynamics.

Forming is a name that has been used to describe the early stages of experience in problem-solving groups. During the “forming” stage, communication is often tentative, as individuals get to know one another and “test” the waters in the group. Here are some suggestions for getting off to a good start in problem-solving groups:

- ◆ We have taken at least some time to get to know one another as individuals. (Try finding one non-obvious thing that all group members have in common.)
- ◆ We have established expectations for how the group will operate. (See “Generating Strategies” Icebreaker at www.cae.pdx.edu/cae/capstu-ideas.html.)
- ◆ We have a clear idea of each group member’s expectation for commitment to the group, and we have established clear guidelines for any individual barriers to getting the work done. (See “Establishing a Framework for Commitment” at www.cae.pdx.edu/capstu-ideas.html.)
- ◆ We know at least something about each group member’s preferred mode(s) of working in

a group. (See “How I am in Groups” at www.cae.pdx.edu/capstu-ideas.html.)

- ◆ We understand the faculty and community partners’ expectations of us so far, *or* we are taking steps to clarify any expectations we do not understand.

Storming is the name given to another crucial stage in group process. At this stage, communication becomes less tentative as group members get to know one another. Inevitable differences of opinion rise to the surface, personalities sometimes clash, and the group begins to discuss details (appropriate focus or direction, who is doing what, how will work be distributed fairly, and so forth). Although “storming” might seem more like a stage to be avoided, remember instead that this an inevitable and important part of the process that leads to better decision-making in the long run. There is a difference between productive conflict and destructive conflict—the following strategies are helpful in promoting productive conflict throughout the storming phase:

- ◆ We have done at least some activities to facilitate forming (above). If you have rushed through the “forming” process, you may want to spend five minutes at the start of each group meeting focusing on pertinent process issues.
- ◆ We have devised mutually acceptable, effective structure for running group meetings. (See Group Inventory Meetings Checklist.)

- ◆ We attempt whenever possible to resolve disagreements face-to-face, rather than over email.
- ◆ We have read and discussed “The DUE process” and explored how we might use this to practice active listening and communication across diverse working styles.

Norming is used to describe the stage of reaching general consensus about how you will operate as a group and complete the project. Although there may still be some minor differences of opinion at this stage, most of the major decisions have been agreed upon. Communication is largely focused on how things will be accomplished, rather than which direction the group should take. Activities to facilitate norming include the following:

- ◆ We have taken the time to bring new or absent group members “up to speed” on major decisions made in their absence. (Failure to do this can sometimes result in group members who are “stuck” in the storming phase while the rest of the group has moved on.)
- ◆ We have established a jobs list. (What needs to be done? Who will do it? etc.)
- ◆ Each group member has clarified the following with our Capstone faculty, community partner, and one another: What steps are involved in my part of the project? What are the deadlines? What should it look like in the end? Who else in the group has expertise in this specific area? What do you need to complete

your part in a timely way? How will you know when you have met the community partner’s expectations?

- ◆ We have read “Time and Stress” and devised explicit strategies for supporting one another when group members are experiencing stress

Performing is the term for the group phase in which work is being completed, most decisions have been resolved, and communication is focused primarily on completing previously agreed upon goals. Here are some activities to facilitate this stage:

- ◆ We have spoken with our faculty about his/her expectations for “group writing” of written reports, if appropriate. We know the audience(s) for written report material, and we know who is assigning final grades for written material (faculty, community partner, or both?).
- ◆ We have discussed concrete strategies for giving an interesting (rather than boring) presentations. (For additional ideas contact Janelle Voegele, 503-725-8341.)
- ◆ We are making connections between our experiences and the larger University Studies goal areas.

Professional challenges

Cheryl Davis (not her real name), a PSU Capstone senior, met with her Capstone faculty to discuss an issue that had come up with her Capstone project. Most of the project was going fine, she reported. The

student team was working together well, the community agency had been supportive and had given the students good feedback about their work so far. The problem had to do with a dilemma she had encountered when speaking with an agency client.

“We were talking about our experiences with the agency, when suddenly, a client disclosed some information that the agency really ought to know about,” Cheryl said. “They ought to know for their own protection, as well as the protection of the client. The problem is, we’ve been told over and over that client information is confidential. I don’t know what to do—I don’t feel comfortable passing on the information, but I don’t feel right about staying silent either.”

As the above example suggests, Capstone courses often present unique opportunities and challenges—or both. In this case, Cheryl was eventually able to turn this difficult challenge into an opportunity for increased communication between her faculty, the community partner, and clients without betraying confidentiality. Cheryl’s example illustrates the many ways that the University Studies goal areas (communication, critical thinking, social/ethical responsibility, and appreciation of diversity) are experienced in Capstone courses, often presenting the opportunity to enhance valuable skills such as negotiating difficult territory successfully in a professional context.

Cheryl’s experience also illustrates the challenge of reconciling differences between what you agree to as a member of an organization and what you personally hold to be of value. Here are some suggestions for achieving a satisfactory “balance” or relationship between these two positions:

1. **Step back.** Give yourself some time to reflect on the situation. You may not have all the information you need.
2. **Develop a mental or written checklist.** Begin with what you think might be the problem(s) and work toward some possible solutions.
3. **Clearly differentiate between values, inferences, and descriptions stemming from the situation.** Describe the situation as clearly as possible without value-oriented statements pertaining to the “rightness” or “wrongness” of participants or situational variables.
4. **Analyze the inferences and value judgments surrounding your perception of the situation.** We often take assumptions for granted and do not take the time to analyze them before making decisions. In the example above, Cheryl might want to clarify for herself why she believes the agency “ought” to know the information, and why she does not feel “right” passing on information.

Think it through, establish your boundaries, and if you can’t resolve it, consult with others. Your peers, your faculty, your community representative, and the Capstone staff can provide support as you consider various options. For Capstone staff

support contact Janelle Voegelé at 503-725-5642.

Encountering differences

From working within interdisciplinary teams to contact with diverse populations, Capstone courses are alive with the challenges and opportunities that come with encountering differences in the working environment. Keep in mind that:

- ◆ You are looking at the world from your point of view only; so your perception of events, filtered through your cultural upbringing, is selective.
- ◆ In trying to understand, accept and behave acceptably in an environment that is different from what you are normally used to, your ethical standards, which are based on your values, may be called into question; so it is difficult *not* to judge another environment, individual, way of thinking, group, or culture on the basis of your own culture's values.
- ◆ Try to understand the other individual or group, which means that you first have to see other value systems as the other group or individual sees them.
- ◆ Know that you will not only have different value systems, but because of that you will attempting to communicate differently.
- ◆ Where appropriate, adapt your communication to the other's values.

- ◆ Adaptation should on on-going and constant.

- ◆ Strive to negotiate a mutually acceptable value orientation.

Capstone students can enhance their opportunity to learn from and work productively within diverse environments by:

- ◆ Remaining aware of one's own assumptions and biases in a given situation.
- ◆ Actively listening for meaning, as well as words.
- ◆ Recognizing individual differences within teams and taking advantage of those differences.
- ◆ Becoming aware of their reactions to change and their adaptability to alternative solutions.
- ◆ Setting clear goals in the areas of understanding and appreciating diversity.
- ◆ Being aware and honest with yourself about your perceptions of others.
- ◆ Using the DUE process (see Additional Handbook Resources at www.cae.pdx.edu/capstu-ideas.html or other feedback strategies which have helped to encourage communication in various environments).

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