Quick Guide to Integrative Capstone Assignment Design

This quick guide was prepared by the WSU Office of Assessment for Curricular Effectiveness (ACE) and is intended to help WSU faculty and programs consider good practices for designing or refining a capstone or senior culminating assignment to more effectively support student learning. ACE is also available to collaborate with WSU undergraduate degree programs to design effective assignments for learning outcomes assessment. Contact us at ace.office@wsu.edu for more information.

Introduction

Given their position near the end of the curriculum, capstone (or culminating) experiences typically carry a strong responsibility for evidence of student achievement of program learning outcomes. Integrative capstone assignments – or similar culminating experiences for seniors – weave together students' undergraduate educational experiences in the major (or in general education) and offer opportunities for integration, application, and closure to the baccalaureate experience. These types of assignments and projects provide students with opportunities to integrate the various elements of their learning, making connections across courses, between the major and general education, and between academic coursework and work, citizenship, and personal life. Integrative capstone experiences may also foster transition to employment, career preparation, or graduate education.

Integrative learning is a significant undertaking and requires faculty to create intentional settings, projects, and occasions. Well-designed integrative capstone assignments ask students to:

- Integrate and extend prior learning
- Grapple with authentic, contextualized experiences and challenging, complex scenarios
- Actively apply independence and agency, in order to synthesize their learning
- Apply critical inquiry and creativity

Note: At WSU, capstone (or culminating) courses for the major may or may not carry *Integrative Capstone [CAPS]* designation for UCORE (WSU's general education program), see UCORE Integrative Capstones [CAPS] Requirements for more information about UCORE [CAPS] courses.

Effective Capstones at a Research University

The Boyer Commission on Educating Undergraduates in the Research University (2001) gave five recommendations for capstone experiences at research universities:

- Senior seminars or other capstone experiences appropriate to the discipline need to be part of every undergraduate program. Ideally the capstone experience should bring together faculty members, graduate students, and senior undergraduates in shared or mutually reinforcing projects.
- The capstone experience should prepare undergraduates for the expectations and standards of graduate work and/or the professional workplace.
- The experience should be the culmination of the inquiry-based learning of earlier course work, broadening, deepening, and integrating the total experience of the major.
- Whenever possible, capstone courses need to allow for collaborative efforts among the baccalaureate students.
- The major project should develop from a previous research experience or internship, as applicable.

Questions to Consider when Planning Capstone Experiences and Assignments

- What framework best meets the needs of the program and its goals & learning outcomes?
    - An interdisciplinary, synthesizing experience?
    - A discipline-specific, synthesizing experience?
    - A method to satisfy external industry/professional standards or requirements?
    - A reflective, synthesizing experience?
- In what ways will the capstone experience and assignment(s) be beneficial to the students' post-baccalaureate experience?
- Are there discipline/professional accreditation requirements to consider?
- How will students be guided toward and prepared for the capstone experience? What program structures will be in place (e.g., course requirements, pre-requisites, advising)?
- If the program also plans to seek *UCORE Integrative Capstone [CAPS]* designation for the course, in what ways will the capstone experience and assignment(s) support the UCORE Integrative Capstones [CAPS] Requirements?

Additional Resources

- University of Hawaii at Manoa's How to Develop a Capstone Experience for Program Assessment
- Grose, A. W. (2017). Internships, Integrative Learning and the Degree Qualifications Profile (DQP) (Occasional Paper #30). Urbana, IL: University of Illinois and Indiana University, National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA).
- Hauhart, R. C. & Grahe, J. E. (2014). Designing and Teaching Undergraduate Capstone Courses. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley.
- Kelly, R. (2009). Capstone Courses Prepare Students for Transition to Working World. Faculty Focus.
- Kinzie, J. (2013). Taking Stock of Capstones and Integrative Learning. AAC&U Peer Review. 15 (4).
- Weimer, M. (2013). Capstone Courses Vary in Terms of Goals, Objectives, Structures and Assignments. Faculty Focus.