



Options for the Capstone Course in Communication Departments

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As students reach the end of their undergraduate years, curricular offerings should be available that allow them to demonstrate both the mastery of skills related directly to their studies and development of crucial “soft” skills. These offerings would provide a structure for students to practice creativity and professionalism and produce a project that parallels the work of communication professionals.

The academic overview of capstones often focuses on more academic/research-oriented offerings or the use of capstones for assessment (Rosenberry & Vicker, 2006). However, Bowe et al. (2019) suggest that while capstones vary, they “often culminate in an individual project or portfolio, both of which can reflect achievement in learning the practice of journalism and be shown to prospective employers.” This article focuses on such hands-on experiences.

Students studying communication may be looking towards a career in journalism, video and news production, filmmaking, public relations, social media management, or other newer career paths (e.g., VR development, podcasting). Ideally, capstone offerings would allow students to create work representative of these interests and career goals.

A significant challenge, especially for smaller programs, may be how to run a senior capstone course that enrolls students at levels that satisfy administrative expectations and are tailored to a student’s interests. This article considers four different types of capstone courses:

1. Major capstone that provides students with latitude in designing their project.
2. Independent Study/Senior Project capstones

- that give students maximum work time and mentoring, without seat time or new content.
3. Content specific major capstones
4. Non-major capstones, with a focus on professional communication practices.

More than one of these courses may be offered, and they may fulfill different graduation requirements. However, they do have specific learning outcomes in common:

Students should be able to:

1. Produce a semester-long project and organize the project into manageable subgoals.
2. Create professional work, as might be used by an external client or appropriate for a professional portfolio.
3. Demonstrate self-awareness about their own skillset and be able to communicate that to a potential employer.
4. Collaborate with either team members or external clients (if applicable).

All these options may be valuable to students and choosing which to offer is often dependent on faculty availability and enrollment.

I. Major Capstone

A senior project leads seniors to complete a project of their choosing. In his discussion of teaching “super courses”, Bain (2021) writes of allowing students to satisfy their “insatiable curiosities” by developing their own projects. He explains that long-term learning is more likely when students control the direction of their efforts. Initial assignments should help students understand time constraints and establish clear

expectations that the project will be completed by the semester’s end. Students commonly propose overly ambitious plans, and while the enthusiasm is commendable, a finished project is more valuable than an incomplete one.

Students should possess the necessary skills to complete the project prior to starting the class. They would ideally have a proposal completed early in the semester, and the professor should distribute an email outlining this expectation soon after course registration. In many cases, a paper related to the work may also be appropriate—research about a journalism subject or a film treatment—would also be advisable early in the semester.

Ample class time should be given to discussions and critiques of works-in-progress. While it may be tempting to include a significant amount of reading or require research or other academic work not directly related to the final project, students will prefer to focus on the main project and may resent too many distractions from this goal.

II. Honors or Senior Project/Independent Study

This option allows a student to work independently, with weekly or biweekly meetings with a professor. The assignments may parallel the senior project discussed above.

The challenge with this option is often administrative. Some schools expect independent studies to be supervised without a salary attached. If a senior project is a major requirement, a chair can advocate for per student remuneration. One suggested approach is to define these Senior Projects as necessary for a graduating student to obtain honors in the department (along with earning a minimum GPA.) This would more likely result in a manageable number of students who choose to pursue this option and possibly position these experiences as distinct from a typical independent study.

III. Capstone [Topic Specific]

An alternative to the first two options is to create a course specific to the discipline: one might offer a senior level filmmaking course or a course where students work with clients on a public relations white paper and possibly implement the proposal. Such a course might be the easiest to implement if each discipline-specific professor has time to teach the class (and there are enough graduating seniors in each subspecialty.) Enrollment is always a consideration.

Such a discipline-specific course more likely resembles a traditional class in the curriculum, although the professional expectations of capstones should be adopted. An interesting example of a capstone course in financial journalism is described by Incollingo (2024).

IV. Non-Major Capstone

For some, this may be the most interesting course to develop and teach, depending on the institutional context, particularly at universities where it fulfills a senior general education requirement. The subject matter may range from strategic communication initiatives to long-form journalism to documentary filmmaking.

Consider the following example: I have taught a documentary filmmaking class as a non-major capstone. Student teams developed an idea, often based on their discipline (e.g., a group of biology and chemistry students produced a film looking into the opening of CBD shops in the area, while a group of education students examined how COVID affected students’ first year at local colleges). The students learned the basics of cinematography using their mobile phones, while the department provided appropriate tripods and professional mics for these devices. Students also were trained in the basics of non-linear editing. Some students had previous video production experience, regardless of their major, while communication majors could also select the class and their expertise could be invaluable to the teams. The talents of the students provided a “real world” mix of content experts and communication professionals.

The Development of Soft Skills

Regardless of the capstone class type, students should have the opportunity to develop soft skills in several areas that will serve them well in their professional careers.

- 1. Time Management:** in all versions of the capstone course, students focus on one major project throughout the semester. The professor creates scaffolded moments that require the students to either discuss or show their work in progress with clear expectations for each of those steps and consequences for failing to meet the deadlines.
- 2. Interpersonal Skills:** Students must communicate effectively with both their team and any outside participants. Following Franz and Vicker’s (2024) suggestion that students do

not choose groups entirely on their own, the instructor can build teams around interests and abilities. This is particularly relevant in the case of the capstone for non-majors, where knowledge and expertise coming into the class may vary widely.

Helping students create clear expectations for each other helps to avoid conflict later. Unfortunate situations where one or more students do not complete their fair share of the work will occur. It should be made clear at the start of the semester that such issues are better addressed early when the situation is emerging, so that the professor can offer to sit down with the group to discuss any issues before they escalate.

The way students engage with the individuals in the community is equally important in terms of their development of interpersonal skills. Students will have to contact potential interviewees and stakeholders, set up interviews and meetings, and coordinate follow-up communication. Students often underestimate the complexity of schedules of working adults. They also may rely too heavily on texting and either need help composing appropriate emails with clear requests and objectives or need coaching and encouragement when calling people on the phone.

Professionalism will be applied in different ways, and any capstone class should stress the importance of keeping appointments, being on time and courteous, dressing appropriately, and writing a thank you email when the situation requires it.

The success of a well-designed capstone is dependent upon giving students agency to create a portfolio piece meaningful to them. As much as possible, give them the opportunity to act as professionals. Experience with project management and interpersonal communication are crucial for their future success, and capstone work can provide practice in those areas.

Choosing the most appropriate style of capstone is predicated on a consideration of enrollment factors and having faculty excited about the mentoring role that is required. Notably, the non-major capstone offers higher enrollments and students with a wider variety of academic experiences, although it may require more rudimentary training in professional communication skills. For small programs, this compromise may be worthwhile, making the course easier to sustain and offer regularly.

The formation of positive academic memories during a student's senior year is laudable. The work

required of a well-designed capstone class should be something alumni reflect upon and appreciate.

References

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