

Chapter 2

Capstone Experiences: Cultivating the Positive in Undergraduate Scholarship

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ABSTRACT

Capstone experiences were originally incorporated into the curriculum to provide students with an opportunity for reviewing, consolidating, and integrating their undergraduate learning and to serve as a cap for the degree program or a bridge to future graduate and professional work. Capstone experiences are recognized as high impact educational experiences and provide a significant opportunity for promoting a positive disposition towards future scholarship and disciplinary research. This chapter traces the evolution of capstones, stresses their bridging role between undergraduate and graduate life, and suggests ways in which faculty can use them to stimulate professional development, continuing personal growth, and lifelong learning among their senior students. In particular, this chapter considers the merits of capstones from the perspectives of positive scholarship and appreciative inquiry.

INTRODUCTION

In 1975, an analysis of college catalogs indicated that only about 3% of colleges offered capstone experiences or required their students to complete them (Levine, 1978). By contrast, a similar study conducted thirty-five years later showed that *almost all* U.S. colleges offered capstones and that they either required or strongly recommended them for their senior-level students (Padgett & Kilgo, 2012). Capstone experiences are available for students completing their baccalaureate degrees and occasionally for those finishing their associate degrees. These experiences take multiple forms: undertaking specialized courses, engaging in research projects, writing research papers or dissertations, participating in advanced-level seminars or colloquia, completing comprehensive examinations, or engaging in supervised internships or practicums (Bailey, van Acker, & Fyffe, 2012; Wadkins & Miller, 2011). As culminating educational experiences, capstone experiences provide “a mechanism to encourage students to reflect on and make

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meaning of the many facets of their collegiate experience” (Kinzie, 2013, p. 30). However, despite their diversity of form and undeniable flexibility, capstone experiences are usually disciplinary or subject-specific in nature and rarely interdisciplinary.

This chapter argues that capstone experiences provide a significant, and perhaps unique, opportunity for students to consolidate their disciplinary knowledge and *also* to engage in scholarship in ways that may endure after graduation. In essence, capstones provide a vehicle through which learners can personally articulate the scholarly mission of their academic discipline and can appreciate the personal and professional needs for its ongoing development. Further, a significant element in the success and enduring value of the capstone resides in what might be called the *positive practice* of the faculty members who organize and support the experience. Positive practice is a relatively new movement rooted in positive psychology and appreciative inquiry that accentuates positive perspectives, recognizes the value of positive-abundance in the research context, and articulates a vision of the future that is both empowering and transformative.

The first section of this chapter provides background by reviewing the origins and purposes of the capstone experience. The second section discusses the capstone as a high-impact educational practice, considers student engagement, and explores ways through which a positive appreciation of scholarly engagement might be provided for the student. This section also contains a number of suggestions and recommendations that may be of use for students, faculty members involved with capstone experiences, and the institutions of higher learning within which these experiences are embedded. The third section considers research avenues that seem particularly valuable to pursue, while the concluding section briefly restates some of the main themes of the chapter.

BACKGROUND

At the beginning of the 1990s, U.S. higher education was concerned with significant problems in the quality, structure, and design of its undergraduate degree programs. It was widely acknowledged that many programs—if not all—consisted of an aggregation of quite disparate courses that reflected the diversity and complexity of the disciplinary major and the competing specialties and preferences of faculty members, academic departments, and individual institutions. It was also generally recognized that this situation inhibited comprehensive disciplinary learning, failed to provide a clear trajectory for student knowledge growth, and significantly hindered student inter-institutional transfer.

The Association of American Colleges’ (1991) *Challenge of Connecting Learning*, without being overly prescriptive, recommended that degree programs should be radically restructured to provide a graduated sequence of learning exposures that followed a logical progression of subject-matter difficulty, integrated learner experiences, and allowed for deeper and inter-connected explorations of the discipline. In particular, the Association considered that the overall narrative expressed in the curriculum should possess three clear and simple characteristics—a recognized beginning, a developmental elaboration, and a convincing conclusion. The capstone experience was proposed as a significant integrative conclusion for the undergraduate degree program, providing students with the opportunity to bring the various strands of the disciplinary narrative to a satisfactory resolution.

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