CAPSTONE PROJECT (PSPA 699)

LEARNING OUTCOMES FOR THE CAPSTONE COURSE

Serving as a culmination of a student’s coursework for a master’s degree in public administration, the capstone course is intended to reinforce and further develop the program level competencies. The project expects an MPA student to integrate their learning experiences into a coherent, focused product that effectively blends theory and practice. The capstone project is an analytical exercise that is expected to be of superior quality.

The learning outcomes include developing analytical skills, framing problems and recommendations, engaging students collaboratively, communicating effectively both orally (public speaking) and in writing (analytical and persuasive) for a public service organization and in the public policy process, learning how to engage in ethical research practices, and improving technical abilities.

COURSE ASSIGNMENTS

Students will be required to enroll in an assigned section of PSPA 699 to complete a capstone paper in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the MPA degree. Under the guidance of their PSPA 699 section faculty supervisor, students will write a major paper (normally 25-40 pages) based on the application of public administration theory to a practical issue or project in their workplace organization. Each faculty member in the department is assigned to a section of PSPA 699 and serves as the faculty supervisor for the capstone projects of all students assigned to that section.

Precareer students will begin taking the PSPA 699A course after completing their first semester of MPA courses (or 9 hours). Midcareer students will begin the PSPA 699A course after completing 15 hours of MPA courses. During the semester in which the capstone paper is to be initiated, the student will register for one semester hour of PSPA 699A: Public Service Research. Once capstone paper research has begun, students must continue to register for at least 1 semester hour of PSPA 699A until the semester in which they will defend their capstone paper in the oral comprehensive exam.

Each PSPA 699 section will meet at least once each semester at the direction of the faculty supervisor. In these meetings students and faculty members will give feedback about each of the ongoing capstone projects. The sessions are intended to promote collaborative learning, build mutual understanding and a greater breadth of perspectives on the topics and issues the students are investigating, as well as to improve their problem-solving and presentation skills.

While the paper is being written, students will meet to discuss progress and receive feedback about the process of writing the paper. Meetings will continue until the student is ready to present and defend the completed paper. The presentation and defense of the capstone project fulfills the graduate school requirements for a comprehensive exam.
A typical sequence of meetings would entail the following series of conversations:

- **In the second semester for precareer students.** The initial meeting should be one on one between faculty and student. At this meeting, the student must choose which capstone option they prefer: the professional experience analysis or the primary data collection option. The group session will focus on problem identification. This discussion will relate to the paper topic and the methodology chosen for the completion of the project. Discussion should include how one identifies and describes a problem or issue in a way that lends itself to potential resolution. Students should make oral presentations to the group (faculty and students) about their problem identifications in this and subsequent sessions. Midcareer students should have this meeting after they complete five courses in the MPA program. The first group discussion will relate to the topics chosen by students, the format of the paper, the overall objectives of the assignment, and the expectations of the faculty supervisor.

- **In the third semester for precareer students.** Several group sessions will focus on problem solving and action planning. Discussions should include how one links theory with practice, helping students to develop their capstone papers. Students may also consult individually with the faculty member for specific guidance on their capstone paper’s development. A draft of the capstone paper must be completed and submitted to the faculty supervisor by December 15th for presentation in the spring semester and August 15th for presentation in the fall semester. Students who fail to submit a draft of the capstone paper by the deadline will be required to delay their oral presentation to the next semester when the oral comprehensive exams are being held.

- **In the fourth semester for precareer students or final semester for midcareer students.** Students will enroll in PSPA 699B and they will orally defend their capstone paper with a formal presentation to a panel of practitioners, faculty members, and students in their PSPA 699 section as well as other PSPA 699 sections. Students must have a presentation quality version of the capstone paper prepared in advance and submitted to their faculty supervisor two weeks prior to the capstone presentation and oral examination; this version will be read and critiqued by the PSPA 699 faculty supervisor. Students will also complete and submit an executive summary of their capstone paper two weeks prior to the oral comprehensive exams. This executive summary will be sent to the faculty members and practitioners who will sit on the panel for the student’s oral comprehensive exam. Students will be challenged in their oral defense of the paper to draw upon the knowledge gained in coursework; demonstrate the ability to analyze, synthesize, think critically, solve problems and make decisions; and to effectively participate in and contribute to the policy process by articulating and defending their recommendations. The presentation and oral defense of the project paper will fulfill the graduate school requirement of a comprehensive exam for the MPA degree.

**NOTE:** *There are no make-up days for this examination, and failure to appear will postpone graduation to a subsequent semester.*

All students who are enrolled in PSPA 699A or 699B are required to attend the oral comprehensive exam presentations.