

CAPSTONE PAPER

LEARNING OUTCOMES FOR THE CAPSTONE COURSE

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

The learning outcomes are the improved development of analytical skills, engagement of students in a collaborative environment to foster leadership, problem-solving abilities, and teamwork skills, improvement of students' understanding of research ethics, development of a greater understanding of accountability, and improvement of technological skills.

COURSE ASSIGNMENTS

Students will be required to complete a capstone paper during their final semester of study for the MPA degree. Under the guidance of their advisor, the students will write a 25-40 page paper based on the application of public administration theory to a practical issue or project in their internship or workplace organization (alternatively, students may choose to complete a traditional paper based on original data collection). After being assigned a faculty advisor, each student is required to get approval of a project idea by submitting the capstone approval form (see Appendix E) to his or her advisor.

Students have a range of styles to choose from for their papers. The choice will depend on the interests of the students, the students' experiences in their internships or in their professional careers, and the consultation between the students and faculty advisors. For example, the paper could be an analytical and theoretical analysis of a project at the internship or work site, a study of the organizational environment using theory to analyze a situation, or a traditional research paper with quantitative or qualitative data collection.

THE CAPSTONE EXPERIENCE AND COLLABORATIVE LEARNING

Each student will work with a faculty member as a capstone advisor. In addition, all students are enrolled in a specific section of PSPA 699, directed by their capstone faculty member. Each section will meet at least once each semester at the direction of the faculty advisor. In these meetings students and faculty members will give feedback about each of the ongoing capstone projects. The sessions are intended to promote 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.

The typical experience is expected to involve multiple meetings of faculty and students. The meetings will typically begin in the second semester for pre-career students or after the completion of 9.0 credit hours for mid-career students. During the semester in which 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 has turned in the completed paper. A typical sequence of meetings would entail the following series of conversations:

- a. In the second semester for pre-career 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. Mid-career students should have this meeting after they complete the first three courses in the MPA program. The first group discussion will relate to the format of the paper, the overall objectives of the assignment, and the expectations of the faculty advisor.

- b. In the third semester for pre-career students. The group session in the internship and work environment will focus on problem identification. This discussion will relate to the paper topic and the methodology chosen for 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.
- c. In the third and fourth semesters for pre-career 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.
- d. In the fourth semester for pre-career students or final semester for mid-career students. Students will orally defend their capstone paper to faculty and other students with a formal presentation. Faculty will authorize students to sit for the comprehensive examination based on their expectation that the student will complete the final version of the capstone paper by the annual division calendar deadline.

ASSESSMENT METHODS

Faculty advisors will assess their students based on their ability to meet mandatory deadlines, attendance at peer group meetings, and the quality of the capstone paper. The course is graded as a pass/fail. Please note: students who do not participate in the meetings and/or who do not submit a quality paper will not be able to pass the course.

Matrix of Alignment of Course Objectives, Program Objectives, and Course Assignments

Program Objectives	Capstone Course Objectives	Assignments that Address Objectives
Develop Analytical Skills	Develop Analytical Skill	The capstone research paper requires analysis of data, interview responses, or documents that relate to the paper topic. The paper must demonstrate a student's ability to critically analyze the topic.
Develop Leadership Ability	Engage Students Collaboratively	Students will meet regularly with both their capstone advisor and their peers who are writing about similar topics. This is intended to be an opportunity for students to give and receive feedback on the progress of the research papers.
Receive Training in Ethics	Learn How to Engage in Ethical Research Practices	Ethics training is incorporated into all MPA courses. The capstone paper is an opportunity to apply this classroom learning into a project. Additionally, the meetings with peers and the advisor is likely to include discussions about methods to minimize the potential harm to participants when human subjects are involved. For students conducting research with human subjects, the IRB process that students must complete to begin research for the capstone is a useful exercise in how to engage in ethical research.

Understand Accountability	Demonstrate the Ability to Complete Self-directed Work on a Set Time-Table	Although the capstone paper is completed under the guidance of a faculty member, much of the work is self-directed. In order for students to graduate, they must be able to complete the work in time to meet deadlines for submissions of drafts and the final paper.
Improve Understanding Of Technology in Government	Improve Student's Technical Abilities	Use computers and/or analytical software to complete the capstone paper and use presentation software for a final professional presentation of the project and results.

When completed, capstone papers are kept on file at the Division of Public Administration but are not accessible to the general public or student population, unless the author so designates. Without such appropriate authorization, only program faculty and staff have access to capstone papers. Students who wish to allow others access to their papers should complete and sign the "Capstone Paper Access" form (see Appendix F).