

Frequently Asked Questions about Capstone Courses November 2010

In 2008, Dr. George Kuh published a report that has become a major resource for universities interested in enhancing student engagement and improving assessment (Kuh, 2008). The report identifies a number of teaching and learning practices that have been widely tested and shown to be beneficial in engaging students. Use of capstone courses is one such practice. Additionally, capstone courses are an appealing assessment technique because a capstone course challenges students to demonstrate how they can integrate the knowledge, skills and values they have learned in their degree program.

What is a capstone course? A capstone course is a culminating experience that integrates and applies what students have learned.

What types of formats do capstone courses follow? The structure of capstone courses varies by discipline but typically involves a project, final performance, major exhibition, portfolio or field experience.

Must a capstone experience be limited to one course? The appropriateness of the length of capstone experiences varies by discipline. The key is that the course or courses tie together learning objectives that faculty members expect the student to have learned in the major.

When should the capstone course be offered? If the capstone course is a culminating experience, it should be offered at the end of the degree program. Some schools create culminating experiences for the General Education courses or for majors. If you create a culminating experience for subsets of the degree program, it may adversely affect the number of credit hours students must take to complete the degree.

Is every program required to have a capstone course? No, it is not a requirement. It is simply a good idea and a great opportunity for assessing whether or not students have achieved the learning outcomes you have identified for the degree program.

How do you assess a capstone course? Capstone courses should require the students to produce a product. In the case of an internship, the student could produce a paper or make a presentation. Other examples of products include portfolios, exhibitions, etc. The final product should be graded using a rubric tied to learning objectives for the program.