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Sustaining Change: Successes, Challenges, and Lessons Learned from Twenty Years of Empowering Students through Community-Based Learning Capstones

Seanna M. Kerrigan

Abstract

More than four thousand students engage in the community-based learning capstone program every year by enrolling in one of 240 senior-level courses that culminate their undergraduate education. In this article, the author shares the context and history of the program, its foundational principles and processes, and the nuts-and-bolts details of the ongoing operation of the largest community-based learning capstone program in the United States.

Each year scores of institutions of higher education contact the capstone office at Portland State University (PSU) to inquire about our nationally-recognized capstone program. Each entity wants to know how Portland State has implemented, sustained, funded, and assessed the largest community-based capstone program in the nation for two decades. The intent of this article is 1) to answer the most frequently asked questions about our model, with the hope of sharing some of our evolving best practices and 2) to continue a national dialogue on student community engagement and the value of culminating community-based learning experiences for undergraduate students.

What is a Capstone at Portland State University?

At PSU, a capstone course is a required six-credit, culminating, general education course situated within University Studies, PSU's general education program. Each of these community-based learning courses typically takes place in an intensive one-quarter seminar-style format led by faculty drawn from various ranks within the university and from the community as adjunct faculty members. The capstone actively engages interdisciplinary teams of students with a community partner, where they collaborate within the community to address pressing societal issues and develop a final product that serves the community partner. Every capstone is required to address the four University Studies learning goals: communication, critical thinking, the appreciation of the diversity of the human experience, and social and ethical responsibility.

One example of a PSU capstone course is Grant Writing for Environmental Advocacy. In this course, sixteen students work in a collaborative learning environment with one

faculty member (who teaches the course in-load) and one community partner (such as the Northwest Outdoor Science School, which engages school-age youth in activities to promote environmental awareness and literacy and participate in community problem-solving). Students in this course experience lectures, discussions, and hands-on activities to learn the skills and strategies of grant writing, as well as relevant information about the importance of science education, environmental awareness, K-12 funding pressures, and equity issues in our schools. Students research viable grant opportunities and write a real grant for their community partner. This type of partnership models genuine mutuality and reciprocity, as students learn about real-world issues, develop marketable professional skills, and critically analyze educational equity issues, while the community partner benefits directly in receiving a portfolio of targeted grant proposals for immediate use with a variety of funding sources.

While the vast majority of capstone students at PSU engage in richly interdisciplinary capstone courses, about 15 percent of our students participate in our largest capstone course, which is specific to the School of Business Administration. Students with majors in finance, accounting, marketing, human resources, and real estate create business or marketing plans for an entrepreneur, company (frequently minority-run and/or small start-ups), or nonprofit that could otherwise not afford to hire professional consultants. In this capstone, students learn and apply essential business strategies content as well as deepen their understanding of complex community issues. Community partners have been thoroughly impressed by the quality of work that the students complete in this course and confirm that they would not have been able to afford to access this expertise for their organizations otherwise.

A growing number of our capstones work with incarcerated persons, partnering with a gardening program at a women's correctional facility, writing programs for incarcerated youth, and an Inside-Out course that brings fifteen PSU students together with fifteen incarcerated men inside the walls of a minimum-security men's prison. In these settings, all participants interrogate and make meaning around "justice," the possibility of change, and interlocking systems of oppression, and they imagine new ways of understanding their lives in the context of the prison industrial complex and the incarcerated persons who become invisible there. Participants—whether they are capstone students coming in from the outside or persons incarcerated on the inside—engage deeply with course readings, discussions, and activities, as they deconstruct challenging issues of race, class, ability, and gender and how these factors impact the administration of justice in the United States.

Currently PSU is fostering the creation of new capstone courses in which the students themselves develop the partnership and the project addressed within the capstone. In these courses, the goal is not to arrive at an independent study composed of one faculty member and one student, but rather a richly interdisciplinary course with sixteen engaged students all pursuing their own passions in the community and coming together in class sessions to investigate what it means to be an agent of change through the lenses of their individual partnerships. In addition to the individual projects that students engage in with their own community partners, they also collaboratively

decide on a collective project that they work on as a whole class community. Selected highlights from this type of class are addressed later in this issue in the article “Contagious Co-Motion: Student Voices on Being Change Agents.”

Scale

Portland State engages over 4,300 students in about 240 capstone courses annually (<http://capstone.unst.pdx.edu>), with about fifty-five to sixty capstones offered each of the four quarters of the school calendar. The vast majority of capstones are seminar-size, face-to-face classes that connect directly with a community partner (usually located within forty miles of the Portland, Oregon metro region). We offer a handful of international capstones each year, in which our students travel internationally to engage in a community-based project that is accompanied with academic course work. While powerful learning experiences, we have found international capstones to be fraught with challenges around how to complete a meaningful senior-level project/final product while engaging in truly authentic relationship-building with persons across cultures.

About ten capstones per term are offered fully online. About half of our online capstones involve grant writing, because we’ve found that this skill is particularly well-suited to being explored within a ten-week period in a virtual format. In doing so, we discovered how this course could engage students in deep and meaningful ways about social issues (environmental sustainability, youth opportunities, political advocacy) while simultaneously addressing our learning goals and meeting a real community need. Online capstones courses are extremely popular for the student body at our urban university, where a substantial number of our students juggle complicated work and life demands. For more information regarding our online courses, see the article “Online Community-Based Learning as the Practice of Freedom: The Online Capstone Experience at Portland State University” elsewhere in this journal.

History

In the 1992-93 academic year, PSU’s provost asked a group of faculty to study best practices in college general education programs. This faculty working group studied the work of Alexander Astin (1992, 1993) on the importance of student and faculty contact, peer-to-peer learning, active learning, and community-based learning. These faculty members studied critiques of higher education and responses to the criticisms, which led to important questions about what PSU graduates should know and be capable of doing in the world. Faculty also considered the literature on access and retention (Gaff 1991). They held the import of this literature against the reality of the politics and budget implications of a distribution model relative to most departments on campus. Members of the committee also spoke directly with employers in the private and public sectors to better understand what employers needed from our graduates. Employers repeatedly praised the skills that our current graduates had developed in their particular subject areas, but also noted their weakness in functioning in interdisciplinary team contexts where they needed to engage in problem-solving across disciplinary lines (White 1994).

Ultimately, the faculty working group proposed a four-year general education model that centered on lifelong learning, interdisciplinary teaching and learning, applied learning, and active inquiry. Built into the model was a one-year freshman inquiry (FRINQ) experience with a peer mentoring program integrally woven in, in which courses of thirty-six students would break into mentored twelve-person discussion groups. The model continued with a sophomore year of inquiry (the SINQ), which offered a wide range of courses across “clusters” of knowledge domains, followed by a junior year of deeper inquiry in one knowledge cluster. The final requirement of the model is the interdisciplinary capstone course described above.

The unique aspects of the PSU capstone (interdisciplinary, collaborative, applied, community-based) all made sense both in the context of the four-year curriculum in which it is situated and with the “urban university” that was clearly PSU’s mission. Judith Ramaley, PSU’s president at the time, saw the urban research university as a “distinctive institutional type...characterized by the nature and extent of its responsiveness to the research and educational needs of complex metropolitan regions” (Ramaley 1996, 139). She envisioned a collaboration among faculty, students, and community partners in ways that would “provide a vehicle for the university to respond more effectively to societal demands” (Ramaley 1996, 140).

In addition to her framing of the urban research university, Ramaley also left a legacy in the transformation of PSU’s general education program with her advocacy of a learning organization culture (Ramaley and Holland 2005, 75). She championed “intentional change as a scholarly act” (Ramaley and Holland 2005, 75) and outlined five key strategies PSU employed in the transformation: an accurate “framing of the question...taking the time to assess the current situation...approaching the challenge from a scholarly perspective, and learning from experience” (Ramaley and Holland 2005, 78). Finally, Ramaley practiced the values that she espoused and taught those around her “to accept and embrace the risk of not knowing how things will turn out” (Ramaley and Holland 2005, 84). In the fall term of 1993, the PSU Faculty Senate voted 37 to 9 to implement this newly imagined general education program, dubbed University Studies. In the fall term of 1994, the first freshman inquiry courses were offered and team-taught by PSU faculty (University Studies 1998).

How did PSU create such a comprehensive capstone program at this large scale?

By fall term 1995, a director of the capstone program had been hired to recruit the faculty and build the community partnerships necessary to launch these senior-level courses. During the 1995-96 academic year, PSU received a \$250,000 donor gift for faculty and curriculum development, the majority of which was allocated to fund a process by which departments proposed large, long-term partnerships to house capstone courses. For example, faculty from PSU’s College of Urban Planning and Affairs proposed a partnership with the City of Portland’s Bureau of Environmental Services, which has been hosting capstones addressing water stewardship ever since. (See the article “Connecting Curriculum to Community Research: Professional Services, Research, and Teaching” elsewhere in this issue for details on this long-

running partnership.) Engineering, which had previously engaged students in hands-on projects that were not connected to the community, proposed partnerships with Tri-Met (a tri-county local public transportation provider). Other schools and departments proposed partnerships with local K-12, social service, and organizations in town, and the building of community relationships flourished.

This proposal process created significant buy-in from faculty and departments. Here was a process by which faculty and departments were determining exactly what a capstone at our institution would entail. The faculty decided whom the university should partner with in the community, and how. There were no top-down mandates from the administration, except that the definitional requirements of the capstone (i.e., that courses must involve interdisciplinary teams of students engaging with the University Studies goals while addressing a community issue and completing a product of benefit to a community partner) had to be met by every capstone course. The flexibility left ample space for creativity, curiosity, imagination, and academic freedom regarding what could be built. Geologists imagined capstones focused on the wondrous rocks of the Columbia River Gorge and the public education programs that encouraged community members to explore them. Historians developed courses that gave students access to original source materials from the founding of nonprofits a century earlier in order to create public history presentations and installations. Many faculty were eager to propose courses that allowed students to delve deeply in applied learning settings in which they utilized their academic expertise, others were motivated by commitments to social justice, and many were inspired by a multitude of passions that could find particular fruition in capstone courses. The capstone program came to scale with the speed and strength that it did precisely because of the investment of faculty who had been empowered to contribute their experience and their passions to guide the development of the capstone curriculum and the partnerships which fuel capstone courses.

By winter 1996, a Capstone Review Committee was formed to vet the courses that faculty proposed. The proposal asked faculty to report on the strength of the partnership, the course learning outcomes and learning activities, and the strategies the faculty member would use to engage students around the general education goals (communication, critical thinking, the appreciation of the diversity of the human experience, and social and ethical responsibility). By spring 1996, five courses had been proposed, approved, and implemented, with students taking the courses as electives (since none of the first-year students who entered the newly-approved University Studies in 1994-95 were yet in need of a senior-level requirement.) Finally, in the 1996-97 academic year, twenty-five courses were officially launched and rigorously studied.

Program Assessment

PSU's faculty development center, then called the Center for Academic Excellence (CAE), provided leadership and expertise to implement and assess these capstones for the first six years of the program. A case study model was developed to conduct

in-depth interviews with faculty and students, focus groups of students and community partners, and classroom and community observations. All of the data were collected, analyzed, published, and used for continuous improvement, as well as for the creation of an assessment model for community-based learning (Driscoll et al. 1996).

There were many lessons learned from these early assessments. Program administrators gleaned insights about faculty development, the benefits and challenges of community-university partnerships, and indicators and impacts of community-based learning on students. The most profound realization related to student learning was the recognition that simply immersing students in multicultural settings in and of itself did not automatically enhance students' "appreciation of the diversity of the human experience." Interviews with students indicated that the community engagement certainly had the potential to enhance their appreciation for diversity, as many of them reported new insights and a feeling of "border crossing" when they entered new communities that they had not interacted with before. Many of the learning opportunities were indeed framed as positive and mutual, and many students could detail the relationships they had built and how they had both learned from and contributed to the growth of others. Unfortunately, there were also findings that showed that students often had their negative stereotypes reinforced and didn't build their capacities for identifying, navigating, and transforming their fears of persons that they perceived to be different from themselves or of neighborhoods where they lacked comfort into a source of learning and growth.

The impact of these data was powerful on the early administrators of the program, and it led to strong advocacy for the capstone program to hire an intercultural specialist who would work with faculty and students to unpack issues connected to racism, to reflect on cultural assumptions, to make meaning of intercultural dialogue throughout the capstone, and to provide skills to interrupt oppression in the classroom and in the community. This proved to be a huge learning moment for those involved in capstone and became the central work of most of the individuals involved in capstones for the next two decades. Twenty years later, the program still dedicates funds to buy out the time of experienced faculty members to work specifically with faculty and students on diversity and cultural issues. Over the years, this work has expanded from mainly focusing on race to include ability, class, sexual orientation, and gender identification and expression. The capstone program continues to assert that facilitating students' growth around appreciation of diversity is the most fundamental and important work that we do. That work does not remain in a silo, but rather strengthens the teaching of critical thinking, social and ethical responsibility, and communication.

As administrators gained experience in managing and assessing this program and faculty gained expertise in designing and teaching capstone courses and evaluating and improving their efforts, a group of practitioners collaborated to produce *Learning through Serving: A Student Guidebook for Service-Learning and Civic Engagement across Academic Disciplines and Cultural Communities*, originally published in 2005 and re-issued in a second edition in 2013 (Cress, Collier, and Reitenauer 2013). In this text, the contributors share content, activities, and reflective prompts designed for

student participants in a variety of community-based learning experiences developed largely through the “laboratory” of the capstone program, along with other community-based learning courses at the university. Additionally, see “Cultivating Community: Faculty Support for Teaching and Learning” in this issue for more details on the capstone program’s twinned assessment and faculty support processes.

Growth

As other institutions have considered replicating the PSU Senior Capstone, one of the greatest concerns that they raise is reaching the scale needed to graduate every student with this complex course involving a community partner and interdisciplinary teams in the community. PSU had to move fairly aggressively in order to have sufficient courses for our graduating seniors under our revised general education plan. With twenty-five capstones developed by academic year 1996-97, we had enough viable models of capstone implementation to serve as guides throughout the university. The following year fifty capstones were offered, and the year after that one hundred capstones were available to students. By the 2004-05 academic year, two hundred capstones were offered annually. Each large increment of growth included brand new courses and partnerships as well as an expansion in the number of sections of existing courses. Community partners and faculty became excited by the possibility that we could offer an existing course more than once throughout the year. Within the first five years of the program, it became the norm to develop a partnership with the expectation that PSU would continue to work with the partner in predictable cycles throughout the year.

Capstone courses became increasingly popular in summer term—a “bonus” term at PSU not considered part of the regular academic year—as students realized that summer term offered them the flexibility to focus on their capstone and community work while taking fewer credits than at other times during the academic year. Summer courses that connected students with learning garden programs, environmental restoration efforts, and environmental studies of soil and water flourished. Expansion of summer programs to community members with disabilities also became possible with students’ increased interest in summer capstones. As the program grew in scope and scale, it became feasible to schedule a couple dozen capstones that would simply take place once a year due to community partner and faculty capacity, alongside scores of capstones that recur three to four times per year, some (like grant writing) with multiple sections of students every term.

Partnership Formation

Within PSU’s highly decentralized system for the formation of community-university partnerships, collaborations with the community come together in a variety of ways. There is no one specified office that promotes or manages all of the institution’s community partnerships. Instead, partnerships are fostered in dozens of units, such as the Child Welfare Partnership, the psychology department, and the Institute for Aging. K-12 partnerships are abundant in our School of Education and our Child and Family Studies program. The School of Social Work hosts dozens of community partners that

serve as sites for its students required internships, while the College of Urban Planning and Affairs nurtures a wealth of ongoing partnerships.

The capstone office serves as a central hub for the development of capstone community partnerships, as well as the proposal process and the implementation and assessment of capstone partnerships and courses. The capstone office first initiated community partnerships by formally partnering with the United Way. The United Way was eager to serve as a community convener, organizing a series of roundtable discussions during which the capstone director met with eight organizations at a time for several weeks. The purpose of the original gatherings was for the director to communicate the requirements and definitional components of capstones (particularly the structure of these courses, involving interdisciplinary teams of students as opposed to individual interns, and the creation of a final product rather than simply the provision, on the part of PSU, of volunteer labor), as well as to get genuine feedback from the community about the concept.

Overall, the community representatives were thrilled with the possibility of connecting with thousands of students, but also overwhelmed by the potential demands on space and staff time for the supervision of the students. We maintained ongoing dialogue and came up with many creative solutions, especially around the challenge of space. Frequently students would do site visits at the agencies but performed the actual tasks of their project on campus. Organizations' concerns regarding staff time to support student engagement remains an ongoing challenge. Ultimately, it does require an investment of staff time to guide students, so capstone courses partner with organizations that find the partnership mutual and beneficial to both the university and the agency. Most agencies discover that engaging students expands their capacity to reach their mission and that an investment of time on their part is required to achieve this end. (See the articles "Enacting True Partnerships within Community-Based Learning: Faculty and Community Partners Reflect on the Challenges of Engagement" and "Putting Impact First: Community-University Partnerships to Advance Authentic Neighborhood Sustainability" herein for more on the partnership experience.) The biggest surprise to most of our original partners was the depth of work that students could provide. Instead of using students as typical volunteers who perhaps would answer phones or prepare an agency mailing, our students were engaged in oral history projects and events, the development of marketing plans, grant writing, and similar rigorous projects.

Each year scores of community organizations and individual community members continue to call the capstone office with an idea for a capstone course. All of these suggestions are documented and saved electronically. Only a faculty member may formally propose a capstone course to the Capstone Review Committee, so a central function of the capstone director is to serve as a liaison between the community-identified ideas and faculty members. For example, the capstone office receives multiple calls each year from organizations wishing to partner around some type of marketing project. These potential community partners are connected directly with an experienced faculty member who serves as point person for the School of Business

Administration's capstone. This faculty member then assesses the project and determines if it is more appropriate for a capstone in the school or for a master's level project. The capstone director works extensively with community partners to help them navigate the complexity of the university and find the best fit for a partnership, even if that takes place outside the context of a capstone.

Students are also empowered to suggest ideas for community partnerships affiliated with capstones. Students frequently come in with their own passions to serve a specific agency, neighborhood, or population. The capstone director explores ways to manifest the ideas that students promote. Sometimes there is an easy link between the student's idea and a faculty member who can formally propose a new capstone course. Other times the capstone director links the student with a faculty member who is teaching a similar course to explore expanded opportunities within an existing course. When it is not possible to create or modify a course based on student interest, we explore the possibility of the student registering for a capstone that allows students to pursue their own community partner with other students who are doing the same. The vast majority of the time students are able to engage with the partnership that they are most interested in pursuing.

Finally, faculty members themselves frequently serve as the initiator of a capstone partnership. Many of them come to the capstone office with an idea for a capstone. Sometimes they already know exactly whom they would like to partner with in the community and simply need support in the proposal process. At other times faculty know what topic they want to teach, and the capstone director helps to locate an organization that will likely benefit from the idea.

The PSU Capstone: Nuts and Bolts

Given the frequency with which faculty and administrators from other colleges and universities request information about the nuts-and-bolts operation of the capstone at PSU, we offer the following as a reflection of our scaffolded programmatic structures and processes.

Proposal Process

The process by which faculty propose a capstone is intentionally rigorous, as it is the foundation for the high-quality teaching and learning that are the hallmark of these complex courses. The course proposal process has evolved into the first faculty development tool that we employ. In order for any faculty to teach a capstone course, the course must be approved by a faculty review committee. This review ensures that the course is intellectually sound, logistically viable, and pedagogically commendable, as well as that the course addresses a real community need and has been designed to facilitate learning around the University Studies goals (communication, critical thinking, appreciation of the diversity of the human experience, and social and ethical responsibility). The proposal has two sections: the first addresses various aspects of the capstone, including the learning outcomes and the partnership, and the second explicitly asks how the faculty member will structure the course to address the

University Studies goals. The questions contained in the proposal process are identified in the table below:

Table 1: Capstone Proposal Form**Section I: General Questions**

1. Title and description of the capstone.
2. Description of the community issue and/or need that will be addressed by this course.
3. A list of the main learning outcomes for PSU students. Please explicitly show the connection between the appropriate University Studies goals and each of your course learning outcomes.
4. A list of citations for the main course texts and readings that will be assigned. (Include detailed publication information, including publication dates, publishers, journal volume numbers, page numbers, etc.).
5. Description of the final product (i.e., presentations, websites, videos, brochures, reports, etc.) to be created by capstone students to address the community need.
6. A list of six academic majors that will benefit from this course and a phrase describing what these majors will contribute to the course content and the final product.
7. Description of the relevant aspects of your academic expertise and professional background as they relate to the proposed capstone and development of the final product.
8. Description of the steps you have taken to develop the community partnership.
9. If this is an online or hybrid course, provide a description of the steps you have taken to teach a course in this format. Have you taught an online or hybrid course in the past? What training have you received in this area? How will you utilize an online format to deliver the course content, build group cohesion, and facilitate reflection on the service experience and the University Studies goals?

Section Two: University Studies Goals

Below you will find a description of each University Studies goal. Under each goal, identify how this proposed capstone will promote student engagement with this goal.

- *Inquiry and critical thinking*: Students will learn various modes of inquiry through interdisciplinary curricula—problem-posing, investigating, conceptualizing—in order to become active, self-motivated, and empowered learners. Typical critical thinking objectives include awareness of connections among specialized areas of knowledge, integration of a variety of meanings or disciplinary perspectives in relation to a community issue or problem, reflection on prior experience in relation to new ideas and information, critical examination of the ways individuals perceive and respond to particular situations, and so on. Provide a specific description of how *critical thinking* will be facilitated through the course project and learning activities:

- *Communication*: Students will enhance their capacity to communicate in various ways (writing, graphics, numeracy, and other visual and oral means), to collaborate effectively with others in group work, and to be competent in appropriate communication technologies. Capstone classes will provide opportunities for students to grow in their ability to communicate in at least one of these forms. Capstone projects will provide an example useful for evaluating students' communication abilities. Provide a specific description of how *communication skills* will be developed through the course project and learning activities:
 - *Appreciation of the diversity of the human experience*: Students will enhance their appreciation for and understanding of the rich complexity of the human experience through the study of differences in ethnic and cultural perspectives, class, race, gender, sexual orientation, and ability. This goal has to do with understanding and valuing the role of diverse realities in human experience. This understanding and valuing is thought to be enhanced when people examine wider ethnic and cultural perspectives within the United States, as well as throughout the world. Provide a specific description of how the *appreciation of the diversity of the human experience* will be enhanced through the course project and learning activities:
 - *Social and ethical responsibility*: Students will expand their understanding of the impact and value of individuals and their choices on society, both intellectually and socially, through group projects and collaboration in learning. Considerations around social and ethical responsibility include creating livable communities, examining ethical and organizational challenges of the present era, and exploring the role of diversity in achieving social well-being. Provide a specific description of how *social and ethical responsibility* will be catalyzed through the course project and learning activities:
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Each proposal is reviewed by the five faculty members who compose the Capstone Review Committee. Committee members have all taught ten or more capstone courses and have rich expertise in pedagogy, course design, and facilitating diversity education. Membership on the committee rotates every few years, so a variety of academic disciplines is always represented. Each member of the committee votes on every proposal and makes one of three recommendations: acceptance, acceptance with minor revisions, or deferral. The chair of the capstone committee works extensively with the proposing faculty member to support their progress through the proposal process, and this support continues with courses that require minor revisions or that have been deferred for more significant redevelopment.

Assessment for Continuous Improvement

The proposal process is one of the most significant elements of the success of the senior capstone at PSU. It allows a high degree of flexibility in terms of the topics addressed, the faculty expertise involved, and the community partnerships engaged with, while also creating substantial quality control and alignment in the degree of reflection and other meaning-making pedagogical practices taking place in these courses.

In our conversations with leaders from other institutions that have culminating academic experiences, we are often asked how we manage to keep this number of

courses from drifting away from the primary learning goals and intent of the capstone. The proposal process serves as that anchor and provides solid footing to then advance our assessment and faculty support efforts. A course is approved for six years. After that time, a faculty member may be asked to re-propose the course to make sure that it hasn't significantly changed from its original proposal. Throughout that six-year period, the course is consistently assessed, as well.

After the proposal has been approved, faculty draft syllabi and consult one-on-one with the faculty support coordinator for capstones. Having completed a successful proposal, faculty are already well on their way to creating effective syllabi, with clear learning outcomes, a defined community partnership, an explicit final product, and an articulation of how this course will cap a student's general education at PSU.

Now the faculty member is ready to teach the capstone. For each new capstone, the next step in both the assessment and the faculty development processes is a qualitative mid-quarter feedback session, which typically takes place in week three or four of the ten-week quarter. The mid-quarter assessment employed by PSU is based on the small group instructional feedback technique suggested by Angelo and Cross (1993) and Black (1998). This assessment is conducted in every new capstone course and in 20 percent of all continuing capstones. This process allows us to provide student feedback to faculty in a formative way and in a timely manner, so that faculty can actually make changes during the term to improve the course in ways that respond directly to students' insights, and plan improvements for future offerings of the course. (For more description of the mid-term feedback process, see the article "Cultivating Community: Faculty Support for Teaching and Learning.")

Over the years this process has been highly successful. It allows faculty to receive real-time feedback on their teaching, get an accurate pulse of where the students are in the course, and learn the concerns of the students in ways that protect students' anonymity. The process also empowers students as active agents in their education to give constructive feedback and provides a safe place to state their fears or insecurities as learners in community with each other and with the greater community they are serving through their efforts. While the primary purpose of the feedback session is for individual course improvement, the data are also shared with the capstone director and analyzed in the aggregate to uncover the successes of the program and to document overarching challenges. This process also serves as a real-time mechanism to ensure that every capstone is indeed addressing the University Studies goals and hasn't drifted away from the intent of the capstone.

Typically, the data show that what is most commonly reported as helping our students in the classroom and preparing them for their community work is excellent facilitation of discussion related to the course content surrounding a real community issue, powerful guest speakers, provocative films and media addressing the community issue from new and multiple perspectives, role playing, and the engagement of the community partner in the course.

The most common changes suggested by students are the inclusion of greater clarity around structural elements of the course, more explicit examples of the final product, and more information earlier in the course about what is expected of the deliverable at the end of the term. During the mid-term feedback process we discover that many students are anxious at this point in the term, given that the capstone differs so fundamentally from any other course they have taken. By the mid-point of the term, students have begun to take in the dynamic and relational nature of the course; deeper learning and skill development begins. Here is an experience in which their grade is not dependent on a mid-term and a final, but rather the quality of a product that will serve a genuine community need and the soundness of their participation that has contributed to the development of that product. Students hunger to see prior examples of outstanding work produced by their peers.

PSU has presented about this assessment process at numerous national gatherings and received the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) national assessment award for institution-wide assessment. What surprises most assessment experts about our processes is the level of trust that we have developed with our faculty at PSU. Frequently, when others in higher education hear of our mid-term feedback process, they remark that “our faculty would *never* allow that!” What we find at PSU is that if the program administrators have built genuine relationships with the faculty and include faculty fully in our assessment processes, then data can easily be gathered in all courses and used for continuous improvement. The data collected in the mid-term review are completely available for faculty to use in their promotion and tenure packets, but it is never required to appear in the portfolio. Experience at PSU shows that the most important element of a strong assessment plan is trust among the faculty that administrators will use the data with integrity and not as a means of enforcing high-stakes judgments or initiating processes to level punitive repercussions against faculty.

In the last week of the quarter, an end-of-term course evaluation gathers data from students about their experiences in the course. Students are asked to state their level of agreement on eighteen items, ranging from how strongly they felt that the community work helped them understand the course content to how well the course addressed issues of diversity. The evaluation form explores how strongly the students believe that the capstone benefited the community and the level of responsibility they felt to meet the needs of the community partner. The assessment asks students to report on how the course enhanced their ability to work on a team, to communicate effectively, and to problem-solve. Faculty support and assessment personnel regularly compare the data from the mid-term feedback sessions and the end-of-term course evaluations to create a comprehensive view of the evolving dynamics of student engagement and learning throughout the ten-week term.

Finally, over the last ten years, Portland State has explored a number processes by which to assess students’ written work in various forms. Our purpose was to better apprehend student learning outcomes through direct assessment of student work products. For example, more than 80 percent of students report enhancing their communication skills in their capstone, but we didn’t know how and in what ways

they had enhanced these skills. The primary focus our first few years was on the final products delivered to the community partner. Researchers tried to find evidence in the student work of individual student learning regarding communication, critical thinking, appreciation of diversity, and social and ethical responsibility, but the task proved to be too complex, primarily because most of the products had been produced by groups, with no way to isolate individual student contributions.

Next we tried using a common reflective assignment distributed in 25 percent of all capstones, believing that we could assess student learning along one of our goals each year, thus developing a complete set of data around our goals every four years. This approach was abandoned after a year or two because it was clear that the common reflective writing assignment was too generic to reflect the context and depth of genuine course-based assignments, which were situated within the real partnership and project that students had been engaging in all term.

Finally, we decided five years ago to have 25 percent of all capstones participate in a work sample assessment, whereby the faculty member generates an authentic assignment for their course that best addresses one of general education learning goals. (All of the courses address the same learning goal during any given year.) The faculty then collect student responses for that assignment, along with signed informed consent forms. Faculty also submit the syllabus for the course and any contextual information regarding the course to best contextualize the course for reviewers of the work.

Originally, the analysis of these capstone course portfolios was conducted by a small team of faculty and assessment staff. The outcome of this assessment strategy was sound, and the results of our assessment finally approached the nuance and complexity required to understand student learning relative to four core goals across literally dozens of distinct courses that, while sharing core definitional and structural features, differ dramatically in the kinds of work produced by students.

Two years ago, in response to a desire on the part of faculty who had submitted portfolios for greater feedback on that work, an adaptation to this process was piloted. Starting in June 2014, the faculty contributing materials to the assessment process become the reviewers of their colleagues' portfolios in a fully collegial and reciprocal process. Now, faculty contributors meet together *before* they finalize their assignments for the course. In these pre-assessment meetings, faculty share with each other about their courses and their partnerships, and they learn about the assessment process itself. Following the collection of course materials, faculty come together in a full-day assessment session, in which they contextualize the materials they have submitted in small groups, participate in a group orientation, review the portfolios of their colleagues from their small group, and offer each other formative feedback about that material. Faculty submit qualitative comments to their colleagues and a mixed quantitative/qualitative response directly to the program. This latter document indicates the degree to which the faculty member found the course to be reflective of the goal under review.

In this way, we have fully married a faculty support process to an assessment process (Kerrigan and Jhaj 2007), and the results have been galvanizing. An analysis of faculty evaluations of the assessment process itself reveals that faculty found their time reviewing each other's work and the giving and receiving of feedback on portfolios to be deeply valuable and meaningful, with all participants affirming that the process felt both supportive of their work as capstone instructors and inspiring through the fresh ideas and approaches that their colleagues' sharing provided. All of the qualitative feedback submitted by faculty confirmed that participants found that the process was helpful to them as practitioners, that it inspired them to spend more time relating to their colleagues for the purposes of both mutual support and inspiration for course improvement, and that many desired to see the process expanded both to include more colleagues and to extend this process into the future, so that they might continue to see and to reflect collectively on the ongoing course improvement that issues from processes such as these. (To view annual assessment reports developed as a result of the practices listed above, please see <http://www.pdx.edu/unst/capstone-assessment-and-research>.)

One of the unexpected findings from the assessment of capstone courses in our first five years was how effective professionals from the community were at teaching capstones. Students clearly articulated that the faculty outside the academy helped them bridge the theoretical knowledge in the classroom to real issues in the community, managed group projects and group dynamics skillfully, brought pressing social concerns in the community into the center of the classroom discussions, made the learning relevant in these culminating courses, and had scores of personal and professional linkages in the community that helped students network for the future (including contacts that led to informational interviews and job offers).

As PSU celebrates its twenty-year capstone anniversary, we recognize the contributions of all faculty, including the large number of non-tenure-track faculty, who have contributed to the student experience and our institutional community engagement efforts. Within University Studies in general and the capstone program in particular, a rich diversity of faculty from a variety of institutional and extra-institutional standpoints are fully welcomed to contribute in program- and curriculum-building ways and, in fact, have been a source of much of the success of the program throughout its existence. We have experienced it to be a positive change at our institution to have senior-level courses taught by faculty who are well positioned to prepare students for a wide variety of activities taken on by successful graduates (such as continuing community activism, community problem-solving, employment, and graduate school), regardless of faculty rank. For the capstone program at PSU, it has been ideal to welcome a healthy mix of community practitioners actively engaged in this culminating educational course. While institutional mechanisms for rewarding these efforts through the promotion and tenure process continue to lag, our program and the committed faculty who actively build it every day find ways to encourage and support each other with meaning, care, and mutual respect.

Funding, Infrastructure, and Staffing

The task of funding this scale of community-based capstone courses is daunting to most visitors who study our program. Due to the multiple-year phase-in of the University Studies general education program following its approval by the Faculty Senate, we had time to plan and prepare for the costs. The good news—and the bad news—is that the capstone program is not only self-supporting but is actually a revenue generator for the University. For every dollar the capstone program generates from student tuition, it only spends approximately 90 cents (even factoring in the cost of space, energy usage, and institutional infrastructure); these surplus funds are absorbed by the university to cover more costly programs. The capstone is among the most cost-effective programs at PSU, as determined by Finance and Administration calculations.

The good news is that this means there is little fiscal rationale to eliminate this high-impact practice. The challenge is effectively advocating for more of the faculty to gain employment over half-time in order to earn benefits. In many ways this staffing structure is a win-win, as professionals with full-time positions in the community (such as the education director of an environmental education program, the director of a community health program, and the director of community development program) can share their expertise in the university, engage their passion for teaching, give students real-world experience that it would be nearly impossible to replicate without their involvement, and keep overall cost for the institution low due to the absence of benefits provided in their compensation. In some cases, though, we find it ethically questionable to refuse to provide benefits to other faculty of practice who do not have full-time employment outside of the university.

In general, the capstone program is run with very little overhead. Our small infrastructure consists of a capstone program director, minimal clerical support to list the courses and answer basic student questions, and release time for faculty support specialists. We have found over the life of the program that committed resources for faculty support are essential. Many faculty of all ranks state that they have received more support through the capstone program than from any other place at the university. For many, it has been the first time they have been genuinely invited to be part of a faculty learning community in which they have the opportunity to talk about their teaching, receive real assessment data that they experience to be useful to their teaching, and get consultation to support the development of their own best pedagogical practices. The capstone program provides course releases for three seasoned faculty members, and their cumulative release time is equivalent to about 1.2 FTE of a non-tenure-track position. The necessity of faculty support to ensure high-quality teaching and learning in these community-based learning courses cannot be overstated, as “Cultivating Community: Faculty Support for Teaching and Learning” in this journal illustrates.

Legal and Liability Issues

One of the first tasks that the capstone director needed to address in 1995 was the issue of risk management. The capstone office and the Oregon attorney general’s

office worked extensively to think through the issues involved and develop a plan to manage foreseeable risks. The issue of risk management is too complex to address in detail in this article, but a few of the lessons we learned were that handbooks for students, faculty, and community partners are a helpful means to name and address risks; a community partner agreement form is a useful tool to articulate the terms of a partnership and the plan going forward, in order to prevent challenges before a partnership begins; and group insurance coverage can be secured for students as one option to limit a university's risk.

PSU provides a capstone handbook to every capstone student, faculty member, and community partner. The handbook defines a capstone and its goals and identifies best practices of service learning (such as the importance of high-quality orientation to the community, reciprocity, reflection, service, diversity, and feedback). Tips are also provided to enhance healthy group processes and students' capacity for navigating difference. The handbook reviews the roles of faculty, students, and community partners. Basic legal concepts are addressed, as are suggestions for working effectively with a community partner. All participants are reminded of the Student Code of Conduct and consequences of violations to that code. The faculty and community partner handbooks address issues pertinent to each of these roles, in turn.

The capstone office promotes the use of a community partner agreement form for every capstone course. The purpose of the form is to clarify a multitude of elements of the partnership, such as who will orient the students to the community-based learning project at hand, who is supervising the students on site, and who will provide direct feedback to the students on their performance. It also addresses issues of authorship and rights to ownership of work products.

Finally, for more than a decade, Portland State charged students \$17 for group liability insurance in case any student did harm in the community and was sued. Due to changes in the Oregon university system, legal counsel determined that students no longer needed to purchase this insurance and that the risk could be managed without the insurance. All decisions for managing risk and liability at an institution of PSU's scale (and at our scale of community engagement) are handled by university legal counsel and risk management specialists.

Challenges

Over the last two decades, the rewards of implementing the senior capstone have far outweighed the difficulties, but in order to empower other institutions to implement meaningful culminating experiences, naming the challenges is essential. At PSU there are four primary challenges that we grapple with continually, almost entirely related to budget: effectively advocating for funding in an era of performance-based budgeting, which includes the challenge of maintaining seminar-sized capstones; effectively advocating for hiring faculty of practice above .49 FTE (so that they are benefits-eligible); implementing and assessing online capstones to meet the demand for online degrees; and effectively funding an alumni engagement program.

Despite its incredible efficiency, the capstone program is frequently threatened with budget cuts. The primary threat is to our seminar-style format. In the 1994 planning documents for capstones approved by the PSU Faculty Senate, capstones were described as seminars with ten students per section. Today most of our capstones are asked to enroll sixteen students per course. As real concerns mount regarding the cost of higher education and student debt, raising class size is one strategy frequently employed to cut costs. Successfully advocating for the relational learning facilitated by these seminar-style classes is becoming increasingly difficult within the capstone program.

The second challenge is advocating in lean budget times for an increase in the hiring of faculty of practice above .49 FTE. University Studies is not funded at a level whereby more of our faculty teaching capstones can apply for benefits-eligible positions. Capstone administrators are perplexed that one of the most recognized capstone programs in the nation cannot secure the funds to pay the faculty teaching these transformational courses a livable wage with benefits. The capstone office will continue to work with new and veteran administrators at PSU to explore the possibility of hiring existing adjunct faculty into more stable full-time non-tenure-track positions.

The third challenge is effectively assessing online capstones to see if they are capable of creating similar transformational learning outcomes experienced by our face-to-face courses, and, if not, learning how to improve the design or, alternatively, how to engage online students in some type of hybrid capstone that still meets their needs for flexibility. PSU is fortunate to have faculty deeply committed to effective online community-based education. These issues are more thoroughly discussed in the article “Online Community-Based Learning as the Practice of Freedom: The Online Capstone Experience at Portland State University” later in this issue.

The final struggle is the aspirational challenge to fund an alumni engagement program that will facilitate the continued active participation of our graduates in the community post-graduation. PSU is perfectly positioned to launch an alumni engagement program that could serve as a national model for post-graduation activism, as discussed in “Beyond the University: An Initiative for Creating Community-Wide Civic Agency.”

Lessons Learned

After two decades of implementing thousands of capstone courses and engaging tens of thousands of students in the community, we have learned scores of lessons along the way. The top five that I encourage each institution to consider are the following:

1. Community-based capstones are fundamentally transformational to students. When done well they change students’ lives and understandings. Engage students and listen to their experiences.
2. Community partners are the best co-educators that we could ever have imagined. They convey to students powerful knowledge in a context through which the students are most likely to remember the content for a lifetime.

3. Faculty with experience in practice are tremendous human resources to create transformational learning courses that connect students with the community. Seek out relationships with these unique faculty and create structures to promote them and honor their work.
4. Faculty support and faculty learning communities are the most effective way to continuously improve the teaching and learning in capstones. These are essential to the implementation of this high-impact practice.
5. Relational learning is at the heart of the transformational power of capstones. The most significant learnings that students report are those they experienced in relational ways. Small classes that engage in collaborative learning are essential in culminating educational experiences.

Conclusion

As the title of this article suggests, there is a tension involved in “sustaining change”—that is, in creating and maintaining the infrastructure to run a community-based learning program of this scope, founded on the very principles of change-making (within an institution of higher education, in the communities in which that institution is situated, and within the field of higher education itself), while remaining flexible enough to allow the program to adapt to the evolving needs of its constituents. The twentieth anniversary of PSU’s capstone has afforded us an invaluable opportunity to look back at our founding, revisit our principles and processes, and recognize our debt to the literally countless numbers of students, community partners, faculty, staff, and administrators whose efforts have continuously constituted this program over the past two decades. Sustaining change is a living process and an ongoing work in progress, and the remaining articles in this issue will offer additional views of the current state of that work at PSU.

More information about the Portland State senior capstone program can be found online:

- General capstone website: <http://capstone.unst.pdx.edu/>
- Capstone course proposal, with an example: <http://capstone.unst.pdx.edu/resources/file/capstone-proposal-document>
- Faculty support resources: <http://capstone.unst.pdx.edu/resources>
- Assessment reports: <http://www.pdx.edu/unst/university-studies-assessment-reports>

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