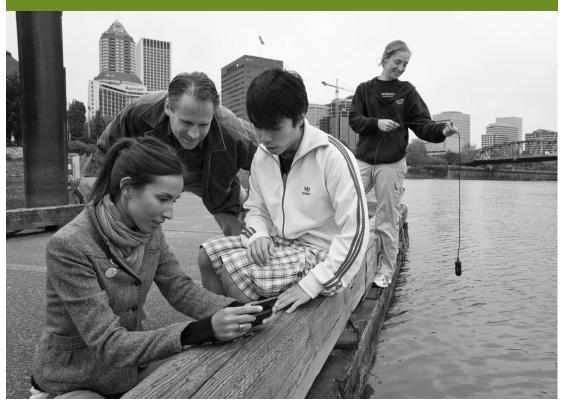# SENIOR CAPSTONE STUDENT HANDBOOK

A resource guide for PSU University Studies Capstone Students

Developed in collaboration by the Office of University Studies and the Center for Academic Excellence/Community-Based Learning

Portland State
UNIVERSITY

WHAT IS THE SENIOR CAPSTONE?

The Senior Capstone is a six-credit community-based learning course. It is the senior-level component of the University Studies general education program at Portland State University. Capstones are interdisciplinary. Students from a variety of majors, under the supervision of a faculty member, work together in collaboration with community partners to address a real community issue. Each Capstone results in a final product that brings closure to the students' experience. Capstone students work in teams to create this product. In addition to the final product, many Capstones require a weekly service learning commitment to the community partner agency.

Every Capstone addresses the four University Studies' goals. Throughout the Capstone experience, the four goals shape both the course and community project.

University Studies Goals:

The goals are as follows:

- Inquiry and Critical Thinking
- Communication
- The Diversity of Human Experience
- Ethics and Social Responsibility

For more information about the Senior Capstone and University Studies, see: *http://www.pdx.edu/unst*

A cautionary note:

Capstone courses require that you coordinate schedules with the community partner organization and other students to fulfill your community-based learning requirement. Planning ahead for these additional time commitments will alleviate some stress during your Capstone term.

COMBINING SERVICE AND LEARNING: ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS

The following principles guide our development of effective Capstone courses. Adapted from *The Wingspread Report: Ten Principles of Good Practice* (1993). Howard, J (Ed.) and *Praxis I: A faculty casebook on community service learning* (pp. 3-12). Ann Arbor: OCSL Press.

Community Voice

Capstone courses are developed to allow individuals or communities with needs to define those needs.

Orientation

A thorough orientation to the community partner site is vital to successful community partnerships.

Reciprocity

The partnership must be worthwhile and valuable for both the student and the community. There must be reciprocity between all partners involved in the community-based experience.

Reflection

Intentional, systematic reflection must take place in order for students to situate prior knowledge within new ideas and information generated by the community-based experience.

Development

Community-based learning occurs in different stages. For example, the learning experience often begins with pre-field preparation and moves to engagement in partnership with the community. It is important

to remain aware of potential challenges participants may face at various stages in the process.

Meaningful service

Community-based learning tasks need to be worthwhile and challenging in order to encourage community involvement and to strengthen students' critical thinking skills.

Diversity

A priority is placed on involving a broad cross-section of students working in a variety of settings and with diverse populations in the community.

Evaluation

There are a variety of methods for evaluating student learning in the community-based context and for assessing how well the Capstone projects have met the needs defined by the community partner.

THE INSTRUCTOR'S ROLE IN THE CAPSTONE

Capstone courses use community service as a vehicle for students to reach their academic goals by integrating course objectives with community needs. To facilitate this connection, faculty should provide structured opportunities for students to reflect critically on their service experience through writing, reading, group discussion, and classroom activities.

THE COMMUNITY PARTNER'S ROLE IN CAPSTONE

Once the course begins, community partners are expected to:

- Orient students and University representatives to the community partner and Capstone project, and provide information regarding community partner's administrative and operating policies, procedures, rules, and regulations.
- Specify what duties and responsibilities students are expected to perform.
- Provide students with on-going supervision and support as appropriate to the Capstone project and the students' needs.
- Offer feedback to faculty and students regarding the students' performance and effectiveness in meeting the needs of the community partner.
- Ensure that the work is conducted in accordance with required safety precautions and procedures.
- Make appropriate written arrangements with students and University, signed by the parties involved, for use of work products resulting for the Capstone project, with regard to acknowledgment of authorship, rights to ownership, and use and sharing of proceeds, in particular if the work results in patentable or similar products.

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THE STUDENT'S ROLE IN CAPSTONE

PSU provides Capstone students the following information to enhance their learning experience and protect them from harm. Students are expected to adhere to the PSU Student Code of Conduct during all Capstone activities. *http://www.pdx.edu/dos/codeofconduct#General Policy*

I. Students should clearly understand the requirements of their community project:

- I have a clear understanding of both my instructor's and my community partner's expectations of me.
- I understand my parameters (I have thought of the consequences of performing actions beyond my agreed responsibilities).
- I have identified the skills needed to carry out this project, and I feel comfortable with those skills.
- I have identified the skills needed to carry out this project, and I have devised specific plans for strengthening skills with which I am not comfortable or familiar.
- I know my client population (I am making every attempt to understand their needs from their perspective).
- I know what to do in case of an emergency.

II. Students will have necessary legal documents to participate in the community-based project:

- If I will be driving, I have a valid license and liability insurance.
- If required by the host site, I will complete a security background check for this capstone. If I am unable to pass this background check, the instructor will work with me to arrange for an alternate service placement.
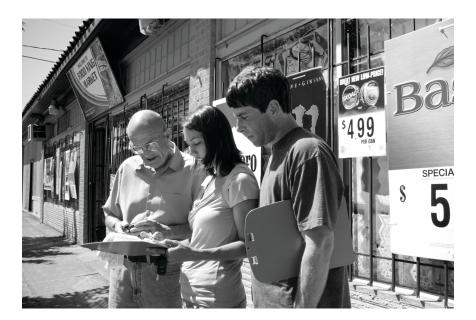
III. Students should take responsibility for their behavior throughout the community-based project:

- I understand that I am responsible for my own personal health and safety.
- I have insurance (if agency requires specific coverage for volunteers).
- I understand the waivers I sign.
- And, I have thought of risks involved in this community-based project. For example:

  What are clients' special needs?

  What can I do to reduce risks by my own behavior, clothing, preparation?

  What behaviors fall outside of my job description? (Example: Is it OK to transport clients?)

IV. Students will be aware of the legal issues associated with the service-learning experience.

- Negligence involves a mistake, lack of attention, reckless

behavior, or indifference to the duty of care of another person. A reasonable person should have been able to foresee the possibility of injury. (Example: wet spot on floor, child climbing on balance beam, etc.)

- Intentional misconduct or criminal misconduct involves potential harm caused by a volunteer. A volunteer is responsible for any harm caused to an organization or individual if the harm resulted from intentional or criminal misconduct on the part of the volunteer. (A crime is a crime even if you are a volunteer.)

- Invasion of privacy involves confidentiality. Follow the confidentiality policies of the

agency. If they do not clearly inform you of the policy ask them for their policy guidelines regarding this. (Example: client histories and personal records are confidential.)

WORKING WITH THE COMMUNITY PARTNER

General guidelines

As you begin your relationship with your community organization, you will probably be eager to make a difference in the lives of people and in the agencies with which you serve. As representatives of PSU, your actions set the tone for an ongoing community/university partnership of which you are an integral part. Although the

following guidelines might seem obvious to you, we include them as reminders because they have often distinguished productive and successful Capstone experiences from those which were less successful.

Be punctual and responsible

Communicate immediately with your site supervisor if you anticipate that you will be late or absent. Even though you are volunteering your time, community partners rely on your commitment and punctuality over the entire course of the Capstone experience.

Respect the privacy of all clients

In the course of your Capstone experience, you may have access to confidential information. Confidential information can include organizational files, organizational projects in progress, and even clients' personal stories. It is vital that you treat confidential information as privileged. Ask if you are not certain whether or not some piece of information is to be treated as confidential.

Be aware

We all understand that conventions for appropriate dress, verbal, and nonverbal communication, and rules for appropriate behavior vary across various communities and organizations. You might not always feel comfortable or always agree with every aspect of your community project. However, maintaining a high level of awareness of your surroundings and, when appropriate, adapting to those surroundings demonstrates respect for those with whom you work.

Be flexible

The level or intensity of activity within a community project is not always predictable. Your flexibility to changing situations helps the project run more smoothly for everyone involved.

Ask for help when in doubt

Your peers, faculty, community partner, and PSU Capstone support staff can assist you in determining appropriate ways to respond in difficult situations.

POLICIES GOVERNING SAFETY AT THE COMMUNITY PARTNER SITE

You have the right to adequate orientation, ongoing supervision, and to a safe and harassment-free working environment in your community-based learning placement. If you ever arrive at a site and do not feel comfortable for any reason, please consult immediately with the site supervisor and/or your instructor. If you are unable to access these individuals and you feel unsafe, leave the site immediately. The following policies are in place to ensure the safety of Capstone students at their service-learning sites. These policies are communicated to the community partners through the Capstone Community Partner Handbook.

Capstone policy on students in private residences

In cases where students are interacting directly with community members as part of their service work, students are not to enter community members' private home/residence unless special arrangements have been made between the course instructor and Seanna Kerrigan, Capstone Program Director.

Capstone policy on harassment

Students have the right to adequate supervision, feedback from supervisors, and a safe, harassment-free working environment. Harassment comes in many forms, but it is typically the use of power or authority by one person to pressure or intimidate another person, using verbal, physical, or sexual conduct. Community partners should take reasonable steps to ensure that students have a productive working environment.

Capstone policy on requests directed toward students

Requests made of students should be limited to actions that directly pertain to students' agreed-to service and academic responsibilities. Examples of inappropriate requests (outside of agreed-to responsibilities) include, but are not limited to: requests for personal favors, requests for loan of an automobile or other personal property items, invitations to social events not related to Capstone responsibilities, and requests for additional work or service hours above those that are required to complete the service portion of the Capstone.

Capstone policy on use of community partner agency vehicles

Vehicles belonging to community partner agencies can be lent to Capstone student volunteers only if the following conditions are met: (1) the community partner agency possesses insurance covering volunteer drivers; (2) the student driver has signed community partner agency paperwork certifying that they are a volunteer; and (3) the student possesses the minimum automobile insurance required by the state of Oregon.

Capstone policy on transportation and liability

The state of Oregon and Portland State University, together with their agents, officers, employees, and volunteers, are not liable for personal injury or property damage resulting from group or individual travel to or from activities related to participation in Senior Capstone. Students who are driving should possess a valid driver's license and driver's insurance for the duration of their Capstone.

POLICIES GOVERNING YOUR ADMITTANCE TO THE COMMUNITY PARTNER SITE

Admittance into a community partner site in the role of a PSU Capstone student is considered a conditional right of Portland State students. There are many factors which can restrict your right to participate directly at a community partner site:

• A Student Code of Conduct complaint filed based on inappropriate behavior in a PSU classroom which allegedly interfered with student learning, health, or safety.

• A Student Code of Conduct complaint based on attendance in a PSU Capstone in which it is alleged that you were under the influence of drugs or alcohol.

• A "pending" hearing of a Student Code of Conduct complaint where the complaint involves inappropriate interpersonal conduct with faculty, staff, or students at PSU.

• A refusal to complete a background check as required by a community partner.

• Community partner complaint about a student's behavior on site or in a PSU classroom.

• A failed background check conducted by a community partner.

In the case of any of the above situations, the faculty member and the community partner are allowed to use their professional discretion to decide if you will gain access to the placement site in the role of a PSU Capstone student. If you are denied access to the community site, you have the right to an alternative assignment in order to complete the required Senior Capstone. Therefore any of the above situations will not prevent you from completing the

Senior Capstone, but may require that you complete an alternative assignment created by the faculty of record for the course. For example, if you fail a background check which prevents you from entering a K-12 school, the faculty member can assign an equivalent assignment to create curriculum that would be used in the school rather than have direct contact in the schools. In situations where a Student Code of Conduct case is pending in the PSU Dean of Students Office, you are not entitled to enter the community partner site.

STUDENT FEE

All Capstone students are automatically assessed a one-time fee of $12. This fee is applied towards a fund for the development of Capstone final products, guest speakers for Capstone courses and student background checks when they are required by a community partner. Additional information can be obtained by contacting the University Studies office at (503) 725-5890.

WORKING IN GROUPS

"Going through problems together in the Capstone was different from most of my other classes where you could just let it go and forget about it when the term ends. In my opinion, [the Capstone] was a lot more like life in general—you have to really work at it. No one's going to want you around for long if you can't work with other people through your difficulties."
- Capstone senior

Capstones require that students work in interdisciplinary teams to address a critical need in the community. This experience offers

several opportunities for personal and professional growth.

Since the success of many Capstone projects depends upon the quality of interaction within the Capstone teams, we have included some timely reminders about group process and dynamics.

Research on groups suggests that most groups move through the following four stages of formation.

Forming

Communication is often tentative as individuals get to know one another and "test" the waters in the group.

Storming

Communication becomes less tentative as group members get to know one another. Inevitable differences of opinion rise to the surface and personalities sometimes clash.

Norming

Groups reach general consensus about how they will operate as a group and complete a project. Although there may still be some minor differences of opinion at this stage, most of the major decisions have been agreed upon. Communication is largely focused on how things will be accomplished, rather than which direction the group should take.

Performing

Work is being completed, most decisions have been resolved, and communication is focused primarily on completing previously agreed upon goals.

Here are some suggestions to help your group move smoothly through these inevitable stages of group development:

1. Take at least some time to get to know one another as individuals.

2. Develop a group charter. Establish expectations for how the group will operate including how you will communicate with each other and how you will resolve conflicts.

3. Devise a mutually acceptable, effective structure for running group meetings.

4. Establish a task list which addresses the following:

   • What are the faculty member and community partner's expectations for the final project?

   • What steps are involved in the project?

   • What are the deadlines?

   • Who is doing what?

   • What does each person need to complete their part in a timely way?

   • What should the final product look like in the end?

5. When conflict arises, attempt to resolve disagreements face-to-face, rather than over email.

6. Take the time to bring new or absent group members "up to speed" on major decisions made in their absence.

Encountering difficulties in group work

The following are recommended steps to follow if you are encountering difficulties in your group project that threaten to impede your Capstone goals:

• Work with your group members to generate solutions whenever possible. Define (or remind yourselves) of your "common" goal(s). Respect different opinions and consider whether there may be more than one route to your "common" goal(s). Although it may seem difficult, ask yourself, "What might this person see that I don't?" Finally, be clear and specific without blaming and make sure everyone clarifies exactly what he or she agreed to do to work toward an acceptable solution.

• If the above does not work, don't wait—speak with your faculty member. Ideally everyone involved should be in on the conversation so that the situation is not made worse if one or two people feel "out of the loop." Your Capstone faculty should be kept aware of major impediments to reaching a solution. It may also be appropriate to seek feedback from your community partner.

If you and/or your Capstone peers have tried your best to work with everyone involved and are still encountering unworkable barriers, you can contact Janelle Voegele

at (503) 725-8341 or voegelej@pdx.edu. Janelle works to support students, faculty, and graduate assistants as they encounter challenges related to their Capstone work.

ENCOUNTERING DIFFERENCE

From working within interdisciplinary teams to contact with diverse populations, Capstone courses are alive with the challenges and opportunities that come with encountering difference.

Capstone students can enhance their opportunity to learn from and work productively within diverse environments by:

- Remaining aware of one's own assumptions and biases in a given situation.
- Recognizing individual differences within teams and taking advantage of those differences.
- Setting clear goals in the areas of understanding and appreciating diversity.
- Being aware and honest with yourself about your perceptions of others.

KEEPING THE CAPSTONE EXPERIENCE ALIVE

In your Capstone you will discuss pressing social issues, be exposed to problems facing our world and participate in a community-based learning project. These experiences generate questions such as: How do we create social change? How do we sustain our community involvement? What resources exist to support our communities?

We have developed Communities of Practice for Continuing Engagement to address these questions and support your continued engagement in community-based social change after you finish your Capstone and graduate from PSU.

We have developed the following resources: a workshop series on skills for social change, a two-credit post-Capstone seminar to continue the work you begin in your course, a compilation of online and print resources, a list of community organizations to get involved with, and issued-based Communities of Practice to support your involvement. More information about all of these opportunities can be found at *http://www.socialchange.pdx.edu*. These resources and this website have been developed to support your continued engagement as both a student and as alumni in community-based social change. We hope you find them useful!

CAPSTONE SUPPORT STAFF

University Studies Office

Cramer Hall 117
(503) 725-5890

University Studies provides clerical support for the Capstone program and provides an ongoing communication link between community partners and PSU. If you have a question or concern related to your course, please call the main office number listed above.