# Preparation for Full Time Employment: A Capstone Experience for Students in Leadership Programs

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## Abstract

This practice paper describes the development and implementation of a senior capstone course for communication and leadership development for undergraduate students. The resulting course is a unique combination of experiential skill development and career preparation. The success of this course provides students with an important and meaningful culmination of their undergraduate experiences.

# Introduction

Students in their final semester of the Communications and Leadership Development (CLD) undergraduate degree program in the Department of Agricultural Education and Communication at the University of Florida are required to complete the senior capstone course or an approved internship. Due to the unpredictability of internships and a number of student complaints regarding internship experiences, the Department of Agricultural Education and Communication faculty sought to develop a unique capstone undergraduate experience which would include elements of career preparation, event planning, and other professional skills. The capstone experience is intended to bring CLD students together during their final academic year and allow students to integrate and synthesize skills learned during their years as an undergraduate student.

A capstone course has been defined as "a culminating experience in which students are expected to integrate, extend, critique and apply knowledge gained in the major" (Wagenaar, 1992, p. 209). Fairchild and Taylor (2000) argued that capstone courses allow students to make meaningful connection between their coursework and professional industry. In a national Delphi study leadership faculty Morgan, Rudd, and Kaufman (2004) found that faculty considered a capstone experience to be an essential component of a leadership program. Capstone experiences have focused on accomplishing a wide-range of objectives, but according to Rhodus and Hoskins (1995) most commonly focus on four objectives including:

- Synthesis of knowledge from formal and informal learning.
- Career preparation through experiential activities.
- Increase understanding of societal impacts, social and ethical issues.
- Provide greater appreciation for the connection of theory to research and practice.

The career path of many students of leadership can be wide ranging since the nature of leadership is transferable to many, if not all types of industry. Capstone experiences which meet the needs of this type of diverse and growing student body are difficult to develop. However, Hall, Fairchild, Baker, Taylor and Litzenberg (2003) noted that despite the challenges, "a capstone course should serve as both a synthesis and as a bridge. Thus, ideally, a capstone course should be scheduled in the last term of a student's program, easing the transition between academic experiences and entry into a career or further study" (p. 48). The importance of providing leadership students with a meaningful and valuable capstone experience should not be overlooked. Nevertheless, to date, leadership

educators have not coalesced around a single best practice for a senior capstone course.

The purpose of this practice paper is to describe the development of the communication and leadership development capstone experience at the University of Florida and its evolution over three academic years. While some of the curriculum has remained in place over the course of the evolution, significant changes have been made following trial-and-error, student feedback and societal challenges. While a single best practice may not be practical, the capstone experience described in this paper may provoke a deeper and broader conversation among leadership educators regarding the design and objectives of the senior capstone experience for undergraduate leadership students.

## Objectives

The capstone course was intended to allow students to integrate the content and skills that have been acquired in communication and leadership courses to date. Specific concepts and skills that students were expected to draw upon for the capstone experience include idea generation, creative and critical thinking, peer review and critique, media campaign strategy and development, media writing and graphic design, special event planning and management, leadership skills and competencies including teamwork, conflict resolution, and project management.

Specifically, the objectives outlined for the capstone experience are:
- Develop the plan, creative elements, and communications materials for a special event.
- Integrate concepts of teamwork, conflict resolution, leadership, and project management.
- Critically analyze issues facing the agricultural industry.
- Assess the state of career fields the student may be interested in pursuing and develop action plans to pursue career objectives.
- Develop a professional portfolio of work including statements of philosophy grounded assessment inventories of who you are as a person and professional using creative and professional skills.

## Background

Many faculty and administrators involved in higher education programs are exploring ways to culminate the educational experience of degree seeking students. Among these the most common historical approach has been the internship. From a programmatic perspective internships were the preferred

method because they allowed students to obtain first-hand experience within their discipline. However, as budget restrictions have increased and faculty time has decreased, several alternative methods have been identified. One of these is commonly referred to as the capstone experience. While capstone courses can be designed and implemented a variety of ways, this capstone course was delivered using a traditional classroom environment. The Communications and Leadership Development Capstone Course (AEE 4930), currently in its third iteration, has gone through many developmental changes through trial and error in designing just the "right" balance of academics and application. Faculty members have had full input and decision-making authority as to the direction the capstone course has taken. The various iterations have included:

- **Year One**: three students enrolled; focused on communication-oriented skills, students were required to complete video production, design and creative elements, and reflections; assignments were completed both individually and in a team; reflections were designed to provide students an outlet to discuss concepts relate to leadership, including their own personal development and team integration; and, concepts were added related to project management and balancing team roles.
- **Year Two**: nine students enrolled (eight completed the course); focused on a balanced communication and leadership approach; students completed a campaign including creative elements with individual assignments and team assignments; concepts were added related to project management and leading change.
- **Year Three**: 25 students are presently enrolled in the course; Two-pronged approach focusing on career and employment development and a specialized skills development in special event planning.

While all three approaches were designed in response to student needs, each has yielded dramatically different results. During year one the students expressed a desire for more freedom in selecting topics for assignments and more leadership oriented material and experiences. Year two students wanted admission to the capstone to be more selective, including only top students, and to have even less of an emphasis sis on communication elements. In year three the faculty designed an experience indicative of some of these needs; however, the course is still in session at this time. Final material will include information reflective of year three, and an overall look at the course and its iterations.

## Description of the Practice

The third iteration of the course was designed to incorporate lessons learned and student feedback from previous years. An instructional team was formed,

including two leadership specialization faculty members, a communications specialization faculty member, and a graduate student assistant in the communications specialization. Together the team compiled the course syllabus to ensure a focus on the elements identified during previous years (contact the authors for copies of the syllabus). Enrolled students were required to have completed three departmental prerequisite courses: a digital media course, a leadership foundations course, and a course focused on understanding the communication process. The purpose of these prerequisites was to ensure a base level of experience among students and assist the instructional team in designing course assignments that all students had the appropriate background to complete.

The course format featured lecture and discussion and was divided into two major units – special event planning and professional growth, development, and career planning. Due to the collaborative nature of the instructional team and the wealth of knowledge and experiences of other individuals in the department pertinent to course topics, both units were designed to include a number of guest speakers and panelists. In the special event planning unit the students heard from individuals with extensive experience in planning local, state, and national special events and conferences, speakers with budgeting and volunteer management experience, and learned about the intricate details required when planning any kind of event. During the professional growth portion of the course the students heard from a professional career advisor who specializes in agricultural careers, toured the university's career resource center, learned about creating professional resumes, and received input from professionals looking to hire new graduates.

Course assignments were designed to provide an experiential learning opportunity for students and were based upon lectures and other information delivered in class. A description of course assignments is available from the authors. In the special events section of the course the students were assigned to teams and asked to create a special event management proposal plan for an actual event. While teams were not required to carry out the event, they were asked to provide information and all of the elements that go into a special event plan for professional planners.

In the career development unit the assignments included a professional portfolio of work completed as well as a resume and participation in a mock job interview. An additional assignment focusing on current events and issues in agriculture and natural resources spanned the length of the course. This two-part assignment included a 10 minute presentation of an issue of students' choosing which was in the news and related to agriculture and natural resources. Students were then required to complete a written issue brief outlining the issue or event, discussing

the stakeholders involved, and providing their own opinions regarding the issue based on what the student learned during the process.

# Results to Date

The capstone course has grown in popularity among students as indicated by the enrollment growth over the past three years. Content has evolved to meet specific needs of the students enrolled in the course. Students were asked about their plans following graduation from the University of Florida. Results varied widely and included students wishing to attend graduate school to becoming extension agents to one interested in becoming a radio host. Table 1 is a summary of student responses. The wide range of students' post-graduation plans presented a difficult challenge for the instructional team. The course was subsequently designed to provide opportunities for individual students to apply skills in contexts most relevant to the student as well as develop knowledge and skills that could apply across a wide spectrum of professions.

Results of the pre-course open-ended career trajectory questions indicate somewhat vague or abstract plans for many of the students. These results are somewhat surprising considering that each student enrolled will be graduating within one year of completing the course. While some students seemed to trend toward more concrete plans such as university extension, graduate school or professional education, a number of students indicated interest in positions in event planning, public relations and communications; however, some did not designate any specific plan.

Table 1.  *Post Undergraduate Plans*

*What job do you want after you graduate?*

- An internet marketing position for a smaller company that does something that interests me as well (fashion, travel, etc.).
- To work with the foreign ag service (FAS) as a communications person.
- I plan on going to law school, so any type of job at a law firm would provide good experience for me.
- Master's degree, then a doctorate – be a professor.
- I hope to find a job that allows me to work in the event planning/public relations world.
- One that allows me to live and eat, perhaps a teacher to start.
- My plan at this point is to attend grad school for sustainable development.
- Law school or non-career type job, probably.
- I would like to be involved in a teaching/extension position in the specific area of leadership; hopefully in a rural setting.
- I want a job dealing with PR and communications.
- Marketing/branding specialist for world racing group, in Concord, NC.
- 1010XL JAX sports radio host.
- Saltwater, inshore fishing guide.
- I plan to open my own restaurant, most likely in the Orlando area.
- Event planner, PR.
- Graduate school to pursue a master's in either organizational leadership or leadership development, then obtain a masters of divinity in theology.
- Event planning or public relations job.
- Teach middle school.
- I want to do something fulfilling. No real specifics yet, maybe PR for urban farms, or community farms, but I want to do a million other things too, this is just one direction, USDA, travel.
- I want a job within the agriculture field. Specifically doing something with design or human resources.  I would prefer it be in Central Florida.

Table 2 shows student responses to the open-ended question, "What will you need to do to achieve your plans after graduation?" Responses indicated a wide variety of strategies ranging from boosting student grade point averages (GPA) to targeted and non-targeted job searches. While these responses are not necessarily surprising, the responses indicate a general lack of planning for post-graduation plans and an apparent lack of knowledge of the variety of resources available to graduating students as well as simple requirements such a resumes, cover letters, and portfolios. Students' level of preparation and planning for post-graduation

presented another challenge to the development of the course. The capstone course needed to be designed to reach students at a wide-range level of planning and preparation.

Table 2. *Plans for Achieving Post-Graduate Goals*

*What specific steps will you need to take to get that job?*

- Searching postings online, contacting chairman of Tampa Chamber of Commerce for networking opportunities (family friend).
- To get the job, I hope to get an internship with FAS and receive my masters' degree in FRE.
- Finish up undergrad with over a 3.75 GPA, get above a 150 on the LSAT and get into law school.
- Work hard and study hard, develop enough contacts.
- My plan is to talk with people I have relationships with, and apply for every job possible.
- Work hard, be personable, let it happen.
- Start making moves now. Figure out requirements, work out travel, housing, scholarships, apply.
- Apply, apply online for jobs with openings.
- Teaching certification, making numerous early contacts to be in the loop, stay positive and be persistent.
- I am going to do whatever it takes. If that means moving to another state, then I'll do it. I plan to contact as many people as I need to.
- Build relationships, tailor my experiences and possibly doing an internship.
- Started internship there in the fall (they said I did a great job and can't wait for me to come back and finish in summer.
- Make payments on cheap apt with garage, boat, insurance.
- I have already been working on furthering my knowledge for the job. I only need to save for the costs.
- Apply to as many places offering what I am looking for.
- Improve and update current resume, use my resources of networking, do as much "last minute" GPA boosting.
- Apply for an internship with the company; submit resume, cover letter; do an interview; travel and visit the company.
- Graduate, test for temp certification, apply for a job, have good references.
- Would like to go to graduate school.
- I will rigorously look for jobs using the internet, UF resources, career fairs, etc.

The two-pronged approach for this course – applying communication and leadership concepts in the planning, design and promotion of a special event plan, as well as career development – seems to have a unique balance for students completing the Communications and Leadership Development major at the University of Florida. The application of communications and leadership skills in an experiential activity seeks to bring together a seemingly fragmented classroom content experience while further developing and refining a unique set of skills. At the same time, students are considering career choices, writing resumes, and beginning a process of thinking long-term about their career.

## Recommendations and Implications

Scholars have indicated the importance of the capstone course for students in undergraduate leadership programs (Andreasen & Trede, 2000). However, research has indicated mixed results in achieving the anticipated outcomes of a capstone experience (Hall, et al., 2003; Sargent, Pennington, & Sitton, 2003). Leadership educators should consider the varying implications of capstone courses which focus on skill development versus capstone courses that focus on career development. While providing students with a capstone experience which allows the bringing together of skills learned throughout an undergraduate leadership program and the application of those skills, perhaps students of leadership may benefit more widely from a focus on career preparation. However, a unique balance between skill integration and application and career development may have more powerful implications for students. The experience of the capstone course at the University of Florida indicates that a balanced approach which focuses on experiential application of the undergraduate program coupled with a distinct focus on career preparation (e.g., writing resumes and cover letters, creating professional portfolios, interacting in professional settings) may provide a more successful and meaningful completion to the undergraduate leadership program.

Additionally, leadership educators should consider the specific needs of each class of students enrolled in the capstone course. Establishing a core curriculum and objectives is important, but tailoring the capstone course to the interests and needs of each set of students may allow educators to better integrate undergraduate experiences. The capstone course should serve as the bridge to professional employment opportunities for students. Regular adjustments and updates to curriculum which reflect changing societal needs is better suited for capstone courses than perhaps other courses in leadership programs.

# Conclusions

The reality of today's world is that good jobs are difficult to come by, difficult to keep, and competition is increasingly aggressive. The ultimate goal of the leadership program in general and the capstone experience in particular is to assist students in fine tuning the leadership and communication skills that will set them apart from their peers and them to be more attractive to potential employers. Each assignment, activity, exam, discussion, and all other course requirements should be designed to allow students to integrate knowledge from their undergraduate programs, but also allow students to develop a solid career path with goals and tools to achieve an immediate, if not an ultimate, career objective upon completion of the undergraduate program. A capstone experience balanced between experiential skill application and career development appears to offer a successful format for students completing an undergraduate leadership program.

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