

## EPC Report on Capstone Survey Results

April 2011

In February Educational Policy Committee (EPC), consisting of faculty Siouxsie Easter, CJ Koepp, Ernie Olson, and Tom Stiadle, student representative Alex Schloop '12, Provost and Dean Leslie Miller-Bernal (chair) and guest Associate Provost Cindy Speaker, sent major field chairs a survey about culminating academic experiences for students who major in their areas. What follows is a description of what EPC learned from this survey and some recommendations it endorses based on these results. This summary is followed by a short section on what EPC learned about internship requirements across major fields.

### *Basic Terminology, Description of Requirements, and Learning Objectives of Capstones*

Although EPC members have used the term “capstone” experiences, we were aware that the term has not always been used at Wells and were told that most students do not use it. Our results show, however, that a majority of major fields at Wells do use the term. Included in capstones are always at least one course (often senior seminar); capstones are also defined as including senior theses or projects, proposals for research, oral presentations, poster presentations, exit interviews, and sometimes comps. Some faculty members mentioned that their fields use portfolios for grading. In terms of the number of semester hours involved in capstones, the modal category is 4 semester hours of credit, but one field's capstone is 3 semester hours and a couple involve 7 or 8 semester hours of credit. Most fields award the same amount of credit to all students for capstones, but in some areas, the number of credits varies with the concentration in the major field.

In terms of learning objectives, most major fields expect students to work independently to conduct an in-depth study or project. Students are required to demonstrate that they have a good understanding of the major field and its sub-specialties. Often students demonstrate their understanding through written work and oral presentations that demonstrate critical thinking skills about scholarship in their areas. Several major fields ensure that their seniors know about possible careers and have developed portfolios and resumes that will help launch their careers.

**EPC believes that an important hallmark of a Wells education is requiring capstone work of equal intellectual rigor from *all* seniors. A key feature should be independent work appropriate for undergraduates culminating their work in a major field.**

**EPC recommends that all capstones involve between 4 and 6 semester hours of credit.**

**EPC expects all capstone experiences to include a substantial written component in which the key features of writing attentive courses are maintained and developed for writing within the major field. Seniors should be expected to continue to develop their critical thinking skills by evaluating information within their field, organizing complex arguments, and addressing counterarguments. They should be involved in the writing process--prewriting, drafting, revising, and editing.**

**EPC encourages all major fields to include some career readiness objectives as part of their capstones.**

*Senior Seminars and other Written Work, Timing, Type of Research, Oral Presentations*

While virtually all major fields offer a senior seminar, the learning objectives vary. Most fields require students to conduct a review of scholarly literature to demonstrate that they grasp the range of the major field and its sub-areas. Critical thinking is encouraged through students' learning to understand scholarly debates within their fields and developing their own position with respect to these debates. Senior seminars often provide students with an opportunity to delve into a particular topic in-depth and do independent research. Some faculty mentioned that senior seminars helped to develop camaraderie among a cohort of students with similar interests. A few senior seminars involve career preparation; some seniors are required to write resumes that reflect the knowledge of their major field in relation to the job market.

Work on the capstone experiences occurs almost entirely in students' last year--in the fall semester, spring semester, or both. A common pattern is having students participate in a senior seminar in the fall in which they read works in common and develop their thesis (or project) proposals, with the spring being used to write their thesis or carry out their projects. Some fields, however, ask juniors or rising seniors to submit proposals at the end of the spring (junior year) or during the summer so that they can write their theses during the fall of their senior year. In this case, the spring of the senior year is often used for students to make oral presentations on the results of their research and to take comps. Only one major field considers students' work in the fall of the junior year as part of the capstone experience. This required course develops students' research skills so that they can work on research in one or more of their last semesters at Wells. A few fields report that the timing of work for the capstones depends on what a student's project or thesis is.

All written work for capstones involves students in the writing process, with drafts submitted and then revised in response to feedback. The most common expected page length is about 20 to 25 pages, with one major field requiring substantially fewer pages and a couple requiring many more pages.

The kind of research students do for their capstone experiences varies. No major field reported that all students do only a literature review, but several said that seniors do both a literature review and some original research. A small number of capstones involve students doing only original research. The largest number of major field chairs said that the kind of research a student does depends on her or his project.

Oral presentations are almost always a part of capstone experiences but again, what faculty mean by oral presentations varies. Some faculty include poster sessions in their definition of oral presentations, whereas other major fields only include presentations that seniors make to the community at large on their research topics. Some major fields require seniors to make presentations just to faculty or other student majors. Presentation length is usually 30 minutes or less.

**EPC recommends that only 400-level courses in students' senior year be considered part of capstones. Major fields may, of course, wish to require courses for juniors but since juniors still have a year (or more) of undergraduate study remaining, such courses do not constitute what we generally consider capstone work.**

### *Comprehensive Evaluations*

No part of capstone experiences exhibit greater variability than "comps." While many fields use some form of written exam, some are in-house while others are developed by outside bodies such as ETS (Educational Testing Service). Exams may be closed-book or take-home; questions may be given out ahead of time but students not allowed to consult books when they actually write the exam. In some fields, comps consist of questions based on a student's research or an evaluation of their final project. A few fields are giving seniors a choice of the type of comps they want to take, for example, writing an exam or submitting a portfolio of work with an accompanying evaluative essay. One new major is planning to have seniors themselves write comp questions. In some cases comps appear hardly distinguishable from writing a thesis and responding to questions about it.

**EPC believes that comps need to be studied further, with the aim of developing some common learning objectives. Rather than conducting another survey, it may be better to hold focus groups during the next academic year so that faculty can develop their own understanding of the reasons for having comps and the various ways these goals might be accomplished.**

### *Recent Changes to the Capstone and Plans to Change the Capstone in the Near Future*

Almost all major fields which have changed the capstone (the majority of major fields answering this question) have changed by reducing the requirements in some way. Some fields ask students to make presentations on a fewer number of articles in scholarly journals than they used to; some have reduced the expected thesis length; some ask fewer questions on comps. Such changes appear to be a response to the increase in the number of students each faculty member is responsible for (workload issues) as well as the perceived lesser abilities or motivation of current students. Some major fields have changed capstones by including career or graduate school preparation.

In terms of changes being contemplated, some major fields are planning to requiring students to have a portfolio of the work they have completed over several years, accompanied by a reflective essay. Other fields plan to incorporate experiential or service learning. Still others expect to reduce the length or number of performances and projects. A few major field chairs say they plan to move in the direction of making requirements or credits uniform, perhaps by instituting a senior seminar. One major field hopes to involve a second reader in each student's senior essay.

### *Strengths and Weaknesses*

Despite all the work involved, for students and faculty, capstone experiences are praised for their contributions to students' education. Faculty say that capstones provide evidence of the skills students have acquired; students learn how to interact professionally, to conduct research, and to make presentations in public. Capstones provide students with both valuable group experiences (in seminars, for example) as well as individual work on topics that interest them. Moreover, because faculty work so closely with seniors on their capstone experiences, faculty are able to write detailed, knowledgeable letters of reference.

Faculty are aware of weaknesses in capstones as well. Some believe that capstones were developed for stronger students than they currently teach. Other faculty say that while capstones work well for stronger students, they are too hard for others. Capstones are believed to require so much time that students' other academic work may suffer. One semester may not be enough time for students, particularly weaker students, to complete their work. Some faculty report that they do not have enough time or resources to evaluate students' work fully.

### *Conclusions*

Capstone experiences are a particularly important part of students' education at Wells, a college that prides itself in dealing with students individually and holistically. While there are many challenges to creating capstones that are appropriately challenging for undergraduates—neither so demanding that they are more suitable for a master's level nor so weak that students are not pushed to develop their knowledge and skills as much as possible—they are a hallmark of a Wells education in which students “learn and practice the ideals of the liberal arts.”\* Faculty can learn from each other about possible ways of accomplishing capstones' learning objectives. We need to be clearer about what the learning objectives for capstones are and “embrace new ways of knowing”\* how we might accomplish them.

\*Quotes taken from the Wells College mission statement.

### **Addendum—Information about internship requirements**

The survey that EPC asked major field chairs to take in February 2011 also contained questions about internships. We learned the following:

- The overwhelming majority of major fields require students to keep a journal during the time they do an internship.
- Almost *no* fields require students doing an internship to read assignments given by the faculty supervisor.

- Most fields require students to write a reflective essay about their internship experiences. One field that does not require this, however, does ask students to write a self-evaluation plus a fantasy essay, “If I ran the place . . .”
- Papers required for internships are generally about 5-10 pages in length and do not require students to cite any books or articles.
- Most major fields do not require students to make an oral presentation after they complete an internship nor do a poster presentation.

In summary, requirements for internships do not vary across major fields as much as capstone experiences do. We seem to have made strides in systematizing requirements for students since the faculty passed new experiential learning requirements, with learning objectives, in the spring of 2010.

**EPC expects all major fields to ensure that internships involve reflection and sharing, the two general requirements for experiential learning. Journals or papers are appropriate for reflection; oral presentations, poster sessions, or at the minimum, discussing an internship with a faculty sponsor, fulfill the requirement of sharing.**