

A Comparative Analysis of Capstone Courses in Criminal Justice Departments of the Southeastern United States

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Abstract

Capstone courses are designed to give students the opportunity to apply the knowledge they have acquired through an education program, through the summarization of course program learning objectives. This application is important for application to real-world situations, employment, or future education. The current paper addresses the responses of criminal justice educators responding to the usage of various types of capstone courses in their program, to include the senior thesis, research papers, internships, portfolios, and/or other major projects in this major course(s). These represent a culmination of undergraduate criminal justice study based on survey responses of criminal justice instructors from numerous colleges and universities in the Southeast region of the United States.

Keywords

Capstone, Internships, Criminal Justice, Thesis

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1. Introduction

Capstone courses are designed to give students the opportunity to apply the knowledge they have acquired through an education program, through the summarization of course program learning objectives. For the capstone course, the combination of applications is important for application to real-world situations, employment, or future education. The current paper and research addresses the responses of criminal justice educators responding to the usage of various types of capstone courses in their program, to include the senior thesis, research papers, internships, portfolios, and/or other major projects and requirements in this major course(s). These represent a culmination of undergraduate criminal justice study. The current research addresses the major findings of capstone course applications based on survey responses of criminal justice instructors from numerous colleges and universities in the Southeast region of the United States. Results will be presented with comparisons of

the institutional programs and by type of institution.

Capstone courses are designed to give students the chance to apply the knowledge they have acquired throughout their education to real-world situations, and to encapsulate all the learning objectives of a student's major (AASL, 2014). Capstones are designed to address a range of important educational processes and outcomes including integration and closure, application, reflection, and transition (Gardner et al. 1998). Senior capstones are generally considered mastery experiences, the final opportunity to instill the values, knowledge, and skills expected of graduates; they are, ultimately, a rite of passage (Hunter, Keup, Kinzie, and Maietta 2012) Up to this point, individual institutions analyze their program and program needs leading up to their capstone course and capstone requirements. Capstones have grown in scope and importance in undergraduate education, yet we know little about the nature and value of the experience for student learning, and in particular the extent to which they contribute to one of their central

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purposes: fostering integrative learning (Kinzie, 2013). The lack of comparative data has made it difficult to develop a broader understanding of the nature and role of capstone courses within sociology and psychology. Although capstones are common, there have been relatively few comprehensive studies of the most common goals, features, formats, and practices within social science capstones (Hauhart & Grahe, 2010). Beginning in 2007 in sociology, Kain (2007) inaugurated research into the general availability of capstones and senior seminars. One consistency across disciplines is that students usually take capstone courses during the final year, even final semester of their senior year in college (Hauhart & Grahe, 2010).

The current research involved the collection and analysis of a survey administered to criminal justice faculty members. The purposes of the research surveys were to determine the frequency and distribution and usage of the capstone requirements within the Southeastern U.S. criminal justice departments and gauge the variance of requirements and types of delivery for senior seminars and capstone courses within the criminal justice discipline. The research had an objective of determining if there is a consistent format and requirement for a capstone course in undergraduate criminal justice, in particular, comparing the employment of capstone courses at private and public institutions. Further comparisons were made of colleges versus universities. Findings may provide possible direction for future policy or decisions in relation to how the subject could be managed and for future research as a means to benchmark this research against others offered at other institutions. Capstone courses are a means to help students attain a holistic, integrated recognition of the key facets of their education over the course of their university experience, particularly within the major. Such courses should also provide faculty with the means to assess how well students have progressed in relation to the institutional learning goals and the subject area's learning outcomes. These will vary by institution and, thus, although similarities are expected, differences are also expected. Such varied findings were validated in a meta-analysis by Brownell and Swaner (2010) that validated a lack of a universal definition for senior capstone course experiences.

The current study represented an attempt to focus on an investigation of capstone course organizations and requirements of criminal justice programs. The current research was meant to compare the faculty-reported requirements of current criminal justice capstone course(s) related to institutional criminal justice programs. Previous research has been somewhat limited to other disciplines such as sociology and psychology (Hauhart and Grahe 2010); and, more so the examinations have been more limited in focus on

a single institution or single discipline. Although prompted by a personal desire to pursue the focus and objectives of the departmental capstone course, there was a need to pursue what had been published in this area and discipline. Further, the researcher compared the presence-of and usage-of capstone courses by various institutions with criminal justice degree programs.

There is a question of whether studies conducted in other disciplines support, or perhaps even amplify, the research findings that are being reported. An initial review of the literature suggests that only a few disciplines have pursued comparable studies across institutions of their capstone practices. Generally, the published discussions of capstone courses in history and anthropology appear mostly limited to the sort of single-course examinations that characterized both sociology and psychology for many years in the Social Sciences. Additionally, studies of capstone courses in the disciplines of political science (Sum and Light 2010) and economics with a capstone focused on using existing knowledge to explore issues and creating new knowledge (Carlson, Cohn, and Ramsey 2002) and the capstone course as related to the honors program (Siegfried 2001). These generally appear to confirm and support both specific results and the implications derived from the current findings.

Seeborg (2008), for example, concluded that capstones in economics ideally should be "integrative experiences" that involve a required research paper to maximize learning outcomes. In a study of political science majors at 32 institutions, Ishiyama (2005) found evidence in support of a structured sequential and integrated curriculum within the undergraduate major, culminating in a senior capstone. The findings supported that students would score well on the Major Field Aptitude Test and would have higher rates of application and admission to graduate programs, though this is not compared in the current analysis. In a study of four institutions, Schermer and Gray (2012) found that the institutions differed in terms of purpose, although the experiences shared a common emphasis on a culminating, sustained, independent act of research or inquiry, centered on the students major, with a focus on critical thinking and communication skills, and a thesis or paper.

In the summer and early fall of 2016, the researcher collected surveys from 134 regionally accredited institutions across the southeastern United States on the usage and employment of senior seminars, capstone courses, and criminal justice internships. A total of 225 unique institutions were sent surveys for a 58.8 percent response rate. Because of the timing of the survey (late summer), respondents received up to four requests for participation. Fifty-eight percent of the institutions represented were public colleges and universities; 42 percent were private colleges and universities.

Table 1. Usage of Senior Seminar/Capstone Course by Type of Institution

Type of Institution	Number	Percent (%)
Public College	5	55.5
Public University	57	76.0
Private College	21	91.3
Private University	23	75.0

The survey was created by the researcher with a sampling of questions from the 2011 National Survey of Senior Capstone Experiences created by the National Resource Center (Padgett and Kilgo, 2012). The dissemination and administration of the survey instrument was conducted by the researcher utilizing Survey Share, a web-based survey technology program. In July, 2016 the survey was launched and there was an e-mail invitation to participate sent to 290 criminal justice faculty members at 140 institutions. The original e-mails were sent to criminal justice instructors currently on the Southern Criminal Justice Association mailing list. Three follow-up e-mails were sent in July and August of 2016. On August 7, 2016, e-mail surveys were sent to additional criminal justice faculty members at 130 public and private colleges and universities in states within the SCJA area. Follow-up reminders were sent in August and December, 2016.

The instructors participating included those from public and private colleges and universities. Several responding institutions returned responses on several different types of capstone courses offered on their campuses. Overall, over 76 percent of responding institutions indicated that they offered at least one senior seminar or capstone course. The following are major findings of this research. As revealed in Table 1, there were no significant differences in the usage of a senior seminar / capstone course by instructors at public or private institutions ($X^2 = 0.414$, $p = .52$). Likewise, there were no

significant differences between institutions reporting as colleges versus universities ($X^2 = 0.46$, $p = .50$).

Table 2. Number and Percent of Institutions by Type

Type of Institution	Number	Percent (%)
Public College	8	5.9
Public University	70	52.2
Private College	24	17.9
Private University	32	23.8

2. Demographics

There were 134 respondents to the survey. The respondents were mainly from the 11 states associated with the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools and Southern Criminal Justice Association purview. 58 percent of the respondents were teaching at public colleges or universities. 42 percent were from private colleges and universities (Table 2). The respondents were generally more senior faculty members: 40 percent were full professors; 22 percent were associate professors; 38 percent of respondents held the rank of assistant professor, instructor, or lecturer.

There was a wide range in the size of the institutional enrollments and the number of criminal justice enrollments. Of those responding, 28 percent reported less than 2,500 students at their institution. 29 percent reported 2,500 to 7,500 students; 35 percent reported from institutions with student enrollments between ten and twenty thousand students; and, nearly nine percent reported enrollments in excess of 20,000 students (Table 3). Twenty-five percent of those responding had 100 or less criminal justice majors; 30 percent had 100 to 50 majors; One-third (33.6%) reported 250 to 500 majors; and, 21 percent had more than 500 criminal justice majors.

Table 3. Enrollments of Respondent Institutions.

	0 – 2,500	2,500 to 7,500	7,500 to 10,000	10,001 plus
Percent of Institutional Enrollments	7	29	15	21

The number of criminal justice majors varied by institution (Table 4). Over half of the institutional respondent (55%) reported that they had between 101 and 250 criminal justice majors. About one-fourth (24%) had 500-plus criminal justice majors. About one-fifth (21%) reported 100 or fewer criminal justice majors.

Table 4. CJ Majors of Respondent Institutions.

	0 to 100	101 to 250	251 - 500	501 - Plus
Percent of CJ Enrollments	25	30	34	21

3. Instructors

Ninety-six (96) percent of respondents, that utilized a capstone course, reported that senior seminars and capstone courses are instructed by faculty members. Twenty-eight

(28.3%) percent of respondents indicated that senior seminars and capstone courses are instructed by faculty members working in teams. The small percentage of senior seminars and capstone courses were reported as being taught by other non-departmental instructors working alone or in teams, including career center professionals, community leaders,

other student affairs professionals, and graduate students. Those least likely to be instructors of these courses are student affairs professionals outside career centers and graduate students.

There was not a significant difference in the instructors for the capstone courses by type of institution. Sixty-three percent (63.3%) of respondents from public institutions and 55.4% of respondents from private institutions reported that senior seminars and capstone courses are taught by faculty members. Twenty-nine percent (29%) of respondents from public institutions and 27.8% of respondents from private institutions reported that these courses are taught by faculty teams, that included assistance from other departments, graduate students, and community agencies.

4. Course Types

Of those that indicated that they had a senior seminar requirement, 85.3 percent of respondents indicated that senior seminars and capstone courses are discipline- or department-based. Nine percent (9.3%) of respondents indicated that these courses are transition courses intended to focus on preparation for work, life choice, life skills, or life after college. Of the remaining respondents, 2.8 percent of senior seminars and capstone courses are career planning courses; only 2.8 percent of respondents indicated that these courses are interdisciplinary; and, 1.9 percent of respondents indicated that senior seminars and capstone courses are "other" types.

Respondents were asked to select from a number of varied

assignments that they utilized in their capstone courses. For those that affirmed the usage of a capstone course in their degree program, a number of varied requirements were selected to include: reflective papers, service learning exercises, and discipline-specific seminar courses, capstone experiences, and high- impact practices that demonstrate a students' ability to write, speak, acquire and use knowledge, solve problems, and apply a variety of skills, including time management and task analysis. Regardless of the form of a capstone experience, the demonstrative student outcome integrates knowledge from the discipline-specific and general education courses in a unique way. It is of interest to note, and will be a focus of further research, the capstone course objectives may follow the program objectives and institutional objectives which might likely be found to differ.

5. Instructional Components

The largest number of respondents (67.7%) reported that their capstone course required students to complete multiple combined projects. Likewise, nearly 68 percent (67.7%) of respondents said their senior seminars and capstone courses require oral presentations by their students and 67.7 percent of respondents said senior seminars and capstone courses require major projects of some type. This was followed by the requirement for a term paper (58.1%) or final examination (54.4%). Less than one-third of respondents reported a capstone requirement of a group project (33.0%), portfolio (21.2%), thesis (29.2%), an internship (18.3%), or leadership training (18.1%).

Table 5. Requirement of Criminal Justice Capstone Course and Comparisons by Type of institution.

Components /Type Institution	Total response YES	College	University		Public	Private		Total Response (N)
a. Thesis	29.2	60	19.7	***	8.5	53.8	***	89
b. Final Examination	54.4	47.4	55.1		55.1	51.3		92
c. Major Project	67.7	60.0	68.1		72.0	59.0		93
d. Area Paper	38.9	36.8	37.3		44.0	27.8	*	90
e. Term Paper	58.1	50.0	40.0		66.7	47.4	**	86
f. Oral presentation / defense	67.7	90.5	58.8	***	52.0	84.6	***	93
g. Group project	33.0	35.0	32.8		41.7	22.2	**	88
h. Leadership training	18.1	23.5	17.5		18.2	19.4		83
i. Internship	18.3	5.9	22.6	***	25.0	11.4		82
j. Portfolio	21.2	21.1	22.2		32.0	6.3		85
k. Multiple combined projects (research project, academic essay, visual presentation)	67.7	75.0	64.7		67.9	66.7		96

* Significant at .05 level
 ** Significant at .01 level
 *** Significant at .001 level

6. Goals

Respondents were asked to rank which specific goals apply to their specific senior seminar / capstone course. The rankings were from 'most important' (1) to 'least important'

(5). This included responses by those with capstone courses, with a 'not applicable' section, utilized. Respondents were permitted to rank from one to eight of the items listed. The mean was calculated based on the scale of most important (1) to least important (5).

A comparison of the mean responses revealed that respondents ranked highest the goal of *fostering integration and synthesis within the academic major* (\bar{X} = 1.94). A very close second goal priority included: *developing important student skills, competencies and perspectives developed in the college curriculum* (\bar{X} = 2.05) and, the third and fourth goals of *developing important student skills, competencies and perspectives developed in the college curriculum* (\bar{X} = 2.05) and *promoting integration and connections between education and the academic major* (\bar{X} = 2.22). The fifth prioritized goal of the senior seminar was the *enhancement of student preparation and prospects for postgraduate education* (\bar{X} = 2.45). A similar prioritization was placed on the goals of *improving students' career preparation and pre-professional development* (\bar{X} = 2.47); *promoting integration and connecting between the academic major and the work world* (\bar{X} = 2.59); and, *enhancing awareness –of and support-for key personal adjustment encountered during transition from college to post-college life* (\bar{X} = 3.23). The lowest prioritization of *'promoting the coherence and relevance of*

General Education of the education (\bar{X} = 3.51).

Respondents were able to respond to more than one 'primary' goal of their capstone course. The results of the survey are displayed in Table 6. The survey responses of very important and important were combined to compare responses. Further, Table 6 further displays the comparison of goals between respondents representing public and private institutions responses on the importance of goals related to capstone courses.

Seventy-eight percent (78.4%) of respondents felt that the important goal of the capstone course was to promote integration and synthesis within the academic major. Seventy-one percent (71.0%) of respondents indicated that the either the most important or an important goal of senior seminars and capstone courses is to foster integration and synthesis within the academic major. Seventy percent (70.5%) felt that it was important to use the capstone course to promote integration and use the course to connect between the academic major and the work world.

Table 6. Capstone Goals of Total Institutions and Institutional Types by Faculty Rating.

Type of Institution / Perceived Important Goals	All Faculty Respondents	mean	standard deviation	Public Institution	Private Institution
a. Promoting the coherence and relevance of General Education of the institution	23.9	3.51	1.35	21.6	24.3
b. Promoting integration and connections between education and the Academic Major	48.1	2.59	1.12	44.2	52.8
c. Fostering integration and synthesis within the academic major	71	1.94	1.15	75.5	66
d. Promoting integration and connecting between the academic major and the work world	70.5	2.22	1.36	73.1	67.4
e. Developing important student skills, competencies, and perspectives developed in the college curriculum	78.9	2.05	1.32	77	81.4
f. Enhancing awareness-of and support-for key personal adjustment encountered during transition from college to post-college life	35.4	3.23	1.43	40.9	27.8
g. Improving students' career preparation and pre-professional development	62.4	2.47	1.37	73.1	48.7
h. Enhancing students' preparation and prospects for postgraduate education	57.4	2.45	1.33	57.1	57.8

Table 6. Continued.

Type of Institution / Perceived Important Goals	Significance	College	University	Significance	Total number responding
a. Promoting the coherence and relevance of General Education of the institution		21.7	23.1		97
b. Promoting integration and connections between education and the Academic Major		56.5	44.6		95
c. Fostering integration and synthesis within the academic major		68	72.1		101
d. Promoting integration and connecting between the academic major and the work world		66.6	72.1		103
e. Developing important student skills, competencies, and perspectives developed in the college curriculum		88.5	75.3	**	102
f. Enhancing awareness-of and support-for key personal adjustment encountered during transition from college to post-college life	*	39.2	35.7		95
g. Improving students' career preparation and pre-professional development	***	61.6	62.7		103
h. Enhancing students' preparation and prospects for postgraduate education		50	60.6	**	103

* Significant at .05 level

** Significant at .01 level

*** Significant at .001 level

And, over three-fourths of respondents (78.9%) felt it was most important for developing important student skills, competencies, and perspectives developed in the college

curriculum.

Sixty-two percent (62.4%) felt that it was important that the capstone course improved students' career preparation and

pre-professional development. This was followed by enhancing students' preparation and prospects for postgraduate education (57.4%). Seventy percent considered promoting integration and connections between education and the academic major as a very important or important goal of their capstone course. Slightly over half (57.4%) felt that enhancing awareness-of and support-for key personal adjustments encountered during transition from college to post-college life was a highly important goal of the capstone course. Only twenty-four percent (23.9%) rated promoting the coherence and relevance of General Education of the institution as an important goal of their capstone course.

Future analysis will compare the differences in these priorities by public versus private institutions, size of the institutions, and whether the departments are independent or combined with other disciplines. Seventy percent (69.9%) of respondents said senior seminars and capstone courses require students to enrol. Courses at public and private institutions are equally likely to be required. Five percent (4.7%) of respondents indicated that senior seminars and capstone courses are required for none of their students. Capstone courses at the largest institutions (over 20,000) are slightly less likely to be required than at the smallest institutions (less than 500). Courses at highly selective institutions are less likely to be required than courses at institutions of other selectivity levels.

There was no statistical difference in the requirement for a capstone courses at public institutions compared to private institutions. There were statistical differences in the requirement for a capstone course at a college versus a university. Private institutions were found to be much more likely than public institutions to require a thesis and an oral presentation/defense as part of the capstone course requirement. Public institutions were statistically more likely to require an area paper, term paper, or group project than private institutions.

When respondents were compared by designation of college or university, those designated as from colleges were statistically more likely to report a capstone requirement that included a thesis and an oral presentation / defense, than were university faculty respondents. University criminal justice faculty reported a statistically significantly higher requirement for an internship as part of the capstone course, than did college-level faculty respondents. It should be noted that the internship is utilized by nearly all of the responding institutions. Only 39 percent of respondents reported that the internship was a graduation *requirement*; and, fewer (18.3%) of those that had a capstone course, included the internship as a required component of their capstone course. No other instructional components listed in Table 6 are statistically different across courses at public and private institutions.

Capstone courses at smaller institutions are statistically significantly reported to be more likely to require a thesis as part of the capstone requirement than at larger institutions. Capstone courses at small institutions were found to be statistically significantly more likely to require the writing of a thesis.

Through the preliminary analysis of the survey responses, there is an initial insights into the various methods used to assess student learning outcomes at or near the end of program requirements. Further, detailed research of the data, combined with specific institutional information can allow future research that can focus on skill sets and whether assessment is individual, course-related, program-related, or institutional-related. There is a benefit to be gained for the program and institutions to assist in assessing the program in context with other institutions, public and private, state-wide, and across the region. Such information could also serve as the basis for further research and on additions or modifications in the curriculum, in an effort to better serve our criminal justice students.

Previous research in this area has identified the need to promote and assess critical thinking and analytical skills and written and oral communications as important outcomes for senior capstone courses. These were found to be important components of the current research, as evidenced by instructor responses. The findings from the current research may provide useful comparative data when assessing capstone needs for the institution; albeit, other factors related to the program will provide additional decision-making information.

7. Conclusions

The initial findings from this limited research project may be used as a starting point for further, more detailed research. The current research reports on a brief and limited view of how a number of institutions assess their capstone courses in the criminal justice discipline. Research of this type must be continuous and supplemented with assessment information within the departments, inter-institutionally, and intra-institutionally. For most, there is a sound rationale for the usage-of and types-of capstone courses. There are some institutions that continue to search for the needed format or the rationale for a capstone format.

The current research found support for the idea that undergraduate education, particularly criminal justice education, entails more than a collection of separate, disconnected experiences and course requirements. The suggestion is that institutions vary in how they instruct their students, the course contents, and in how they enhance opportunities to connect, deepen, and generalize learning

beyond the immediate setting where it occurs.

The increase in the number of institutions that offer a capstone course as a culminating experiences and the focus may trend for greater institutional investment and resources in integrative learning and experiences that bring coherence to undergraduate education. This, in turn, requires more focus on ensuring the integrative potential of the capstone course. To date, there is limited research on capstones, especially in the criminal justice discipline, that supports positive outcomes for students who participate. There is a need to focus future research on this topic to educate the students and faculty members and the academy on the quality-added of these experiences and their contribution to integrative learning essential in the criminal justice program.

While the specific content of the programs surveyed varies, to some degree, there are still opportunities in each program to integrate, synthesize, and apply knowledge essential to ensuring deep, meaningful learning experiences. The senior capstone course provides students with an opportunity to culminate the undergraduate program and graduate with a preparation to continue their educational journey in higher education or begin their career in their chosen major.

It is a responsibility of the institutions, beginning at the department level, to better understand the extent to which students' experience integrative learning and the aspects of the culminating experience that make this happen. Further research on research findings on capstone experiences, combined with institutional assessments, will be instrumental in aiding institutions in the maximization of the potential for improving the capstone experience to focus and function on the successful integrated learning and educational coherence of their students.

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