Honors Capstone Experiences
Rationale and Guidelines

A capstone is an architectural term that refers to the final stone laid to finish a structure. Over the years, Capstone has also come to refer to a crowning achievement. Just as an architectural capstone completes a structure, the crowning achievement experienced in an academic Capstone completes a student’s academic career by serving as a "final, mastery experience" (Davis, 1993). By addressing the kinds of questions and problems faced within their disciplines, students engaged in a Capstone focus on the "ways of knowing" in their disciplines. Capstone experiences elucidate coherence within the college experience by enabling students to make connections between courses that some educators believe are delivered in a “piecemeal” fashion (Carlson & Peterson, 1993; Julian, 1993).

A capstone experience in academia specifically is "a culminating experience in which students are expected to integrate special studies with the major, and extend, critique, and apply knowledge gained in their major" (Wagenaar, 1993). This culminating experience enables a student to demonstrate an integrated understanding of a specific field of study and enables that student to apply the tools and methods of inquiry of that field. The consequence of this culminating experience or Capstone project is the generation of new knowledge.

The Capstone is also a pivotal experience during which students move from education to professional practice. In other words, a Capstone serves as a transition from college to a career, a professional program, or a graduate school. Enabling Honors students to make the connection between their college careers and their professions or post-graduate studies increases their probability of success. Consequently, the Honors Program is committed to facilitating a meaningful Capstone experience for every Honors student.

Students who enter the Honors Program in fall 2009 and after are required to complete an Honors Capstone project. Because Honors students are enrolled in every college, they are from a wide variety of disciplines each of which has specific methods of inquiry and means of generating new knowledge. An Honors Capstone experience will therefore be defined broadly. However, some majors currently require that students complete some type of culminating experience such as a senior project, in which case Honors students will need to articulate how their capstone experience differs from those of non-Honors students in their major.

Criteria for an Honors Capstone

1. The culminating experience, event, or project must take place near the end of an undergraduate academic career. Ideally, a Capstone experience will begin no earlier than the spring semester of the junior year and no later than the fall semester of the senior year. For some projects (e.g., an Honors Thesis), however, a student may begin in the fall semester of the junior year.

2. In many cases a Capstone experience may span two or more semesters and count for six or more hours of credit. This is not to say that it is impossible for a single semester project for
three credit hours (e.g., intensive summer internship) to serve as a Capstone. However, in either case it will be necessary to articulate the significance and impact of the experience.

3. Honors Capstones must be carried out under the supervision and in collaboration with a faculty member. This faculty member must formally commit to mentor the Honors student, help the student develop learning goals and objectives (see Tips below), and evaluate the student’s progress in achieving these goals and objectives (i.e., provide a formal evaluation and grade). Under certain circumstances, a Capstone (e.g., internship) may be carried out under the supervision of a professional in a field. On these occasions a faculty member (e.g., Director, Coordinator, Instructor) must act as a liaison between the professional and the university.

4. A Capstone must result in a presentation appropriate for the specific field (e.g., a poster presentation for the sciences, a showing for an art student). Honors students are encouraged to present their Capstone projects during the annual Scholars Transforming Academic Research Symposium (STARS) held at the university at the end of every spring term. Honors students are also strongly encouraged to present their projects at professional conferences and academic conferences (e.g., National Conference on Undergraduate Research, National Collegiate Honors Conference) whenever possible. In the event an Honors student cannot present during STARS, they may substitute a professional or academic conference presentation in order to meet this requirement.

Some examples of what Honors Capstones might look like

- **A traditional Honors thesis.** A student identifies a faculty mentor to develop a thesis topic, engages in significant research related to that topic, prepares a written thesis, submits a manuscript to be catalogued in the Thomas Carpenter Library, and presents this project at STARS or a professional conference. Courses could include six hours of research or individual study credit over two terms in that student’s major department. In the event a department requires a single-term senior thesis for its majors, an Honors student would engage in a more significant project and register for an additional three credit hours in an appropriate course approved by the Coordinator of the Collaborative Undergraduate Scholarship Program (CUSP).

- **An intensive internship.** A student works as an integral member of an organization for a protracted period of time during which a supervisor in the organization and a faculty mentor collaboratively establish learning goals and objectives and provide the student with feedback.

- **An expanded senior design project.** Some students are required by their major to complete a senior design project. This project could be submitted as an Honors Capstone, with documentation (developed in consultation with a faculty mentor) justifying how this senior design project satisfies the spirit of an Honors Capstone. Generally, the course registrations for this option would be those used for senior design projects in the department. In some cases such an expanded project would involve two semesters of work.
Involvement in a major course design and implementation effort. A student might in collaboration with a faculty mentor design a special topic course and serve as a facilitator in the implementation of this course.

A significant, high-level service learning experience. A student might in collaboration with a faculty mentor design and implement a community program addressing the needs of a high risk or special needs population.

An extensive study abroad experience. A student could develop a manuscript from a prolonged study abroad experience. These experiences are generally at least a term in length, but there may be exceptions.

An Academic Portfolio. A student could produce an electronic compilation of evidence of development as a student including a retrospective reflection on his or her undergraduate academic career summarized in a substantive reflection paper.

As illustrated by the many examples above, an Honors Capstone may take many forms and is limited only by the students’ creativity. Honors students may submit an application to complete one of these types of Capstones. Alternatively, students may submit an application to complete a Capstone that they devise. The key to a successful application for an Honors Capstone, whether it is one outlined above or devised by the student, is to clearly articulate in the application 1) how the Capstone will enable that student to demonstrate an integrated understanding of a specific field of study, 2) enable that student to apply the tools and methods of inquiry of that field, and 3) enable that student to generate new knowledge.

Some key points:
• If non-Honors courses are used to satisfy your Capstone hours, you should include the course number(s) and title(s) in your application and indicate how the specific course(s) will enable you to have a Capstone experience.
• Although many Capstones will require more than a single term and more than three credit hours to complete, particular circumstance may make it difficult or impossible to register for a total of six Capstone hours. The number of credit hours and the number of terms is far less important than articulating thoroughly 1) how the Capstone will enable you to demonstrate an integrated understanding of your field of study, 2) enable you to apply the tools and methods of inquiry of your field, and 3) enable you to generate new knowledge. It is, however, worth noting that in most cases it is valuable for you to have courses on your transcript that reflect your Honors Capstone experience.
• Your Capstone must have a faculty mentor in a discipline related to the subject matter of your Capstone. Other individuals (e.g., a professional within an organization other than the university) may serve as your Capstone supervisor with the approval and cooperation of a faculty member in the discipline of the Capstone.

Procedures

A minimum of 3 (and ideally 4) semesters prior to your intended graduation, you should submit an Honors Program Capstone Application. Application deadlines are October 15th and March
15th of each year. Applications received by October 15th will be reviewed for enrollment during the following spring term. Applications received by March 15th will be reviewed for enrollment in the following summer or fall term.

Identify faculty members who may potentially serve as faculty mentor for your project. You may have had a specific professor for a course that gained your interest. You may want to go on the internet through Google Scholar or through departmental web pages to explore various professors’ backgrounds. Once you identify potential mentors with whom you may want to collaborate while completing your Capstone, arrange to meet with these professors to discuss their interests and their willingness to supervise you during your Capstone.

Complete the application (see attached) in collaboration with your faculty mentor. We recommend that you complete a first draft of your application and submit it to your faculty mentor at least two weeks and ideally four weeks prior to the deadline. After obtaining your faculty mentor’s feedback, revise your application.

If you are submitting an application involving research/scholarship/creative project or a community/service project, you must make an appointment to meet with the Coordinator of CUSP (LouAnne Hawkins, RN, MA) and obtain her signature and approval prior to submitting an application.

If you are submitting an application involving an internship, you must make an appointment to meet with the Director of the Honors Program (Dr. Mary Borg) and obtain her signature and approval prior to submitting an application.

If you are submitting an application involving study abroad, you must make an appointment to meet with the faculty member sponsoring the trip and obtain his/her signature and approval prior to submitting an application.

Ask your faculty mentor to submit a recommendation either online (http://…….) or in an envelope with his or her signature across the seal delivered with your application to the Honors Office by the deadline.

Once you have submitted your application, immediately make an appointment with the Honors Advisor (Laura Ache) to discuss how the Capstone courses will fit into your program of study.

Prior to the end of the term in which your application is submitted, you will be notified of your applications approval or requests for revisions. If approved, you may then seek any necessary permissions to enroll in courses. The Honors Advisor can assist you in obtaining these permissions or advise you how to obtain these permissions from other departments.

Registration for approved courses is ultimately your responsibility. Failure to register for courses may mean that you are ineligible to receive an Honors designation upon graduation.

Various types of Capstone projects will require different types of products be turned in to the Honors Programs. The type of product (e.g., manuscript, portfolio, slides) will be outlined and
approved in your proposal. In addition, you should plan to present your Capstone project to the university community during STARS or another public forum. The Coordinator of CUSP can assist students in identifying appropriate venues for presentations.

Tips
Your application should include specific learning objectives or outcomes as well as the means by which your faculty mentor intends to evaluate your success in achieving these objectives or outcomes. In developing your learning objectives you may want to consider the following.

According to Wagenaar (1993), a Capstone serves many functions. Students completing a Capstone:
- Integrate and synthesize information within a field.
- Extend a field.
- Critique a field.
- Apply knowledge from a field.
- Address at a higher level issues raised in introductory courses.
- Explore key arguments within a field.
- Make connections with knowledge gained in general education.
- Make comparisons between fields.
- Engage in critical thinking generally and within their field specifically.
- Examine values and alternative perspectives.

Ultimately, the overarching purpose of a Capstone experience is to provide coherence for the academic experience through synthesis and integration of information. Nonetheless, this synthesis and integration can be conceptualized in a number of ways:
- Integration and application of learning from general education courses with learning within the major (Nichols, 1992).
- Integration of various subfields within a discipline (Morely, 1992).
- Integration of learning within a major with expected professional roles after graduation (Hartman, 1993).
- Integration of theoretical concepts and empirical evidence (Davis, 1993).
- Integration of theoretical concepts with methodological considerations (Smith, 1993).
- Integration of knowledge from various disciplines in light of complex ethical or social issues.
Honors Program Capstone Application

Applicant’s Name: _____________________________ Expected Graduation Term/Year:______

Applicant’s Local Address________________________________________________________

Applicant’s Local Phone Number________________ Applicant’s E-mail __________________

Applicant’s Major ____________________________ Minor ____________________________

Faculty/Professional Mentor: ___________________________________________________
(This is the person who will verify that you have completed your capstone project)

My Capstone Project Falls into the Following Category:

☐  Research/Scholarship/Creative Project

☐  Study Abroad Experience

☐  Community-Based Project

☐  Internship Project

☐  Other (Please describe in a sentence or two)

Please type your application as a separate document that explicitly includes each of the titled sections listed on the second page of this form. Attach your typed application to this title page and submit it to the Honors Program Advisor.

Applicant’s signature:______________________________ Date:_________________
Format for Capstone Proposal

Tentative Title:

Capstone Description: Clearly explain the purpose of your capstone project including any literature pertaining to similar projects.

Rationale: While writing this section, you may find it helpful to consider the following questions. How will this Capstone enable you to demonstrate an integrated understanding of your field of study? How will this Capstone enable you to apply the tools and methods of inquiry of your field? How will this Capstone enable you to generate new knowledge? How will this Capstone enable you to demonstrate a mastery of both a specific topic and the relation of this topic to your field? How will this Capstone enable you to demonstrate your analytical and interpretive skills?

Learning objectives: Refer to the Tips section on page 5 of the Rationale and Guidelines.

Course(s) in which you plan to enroll and terms in which you plan to enroll: Describe how this course(s) will enable you to meet your learning objectives. If you do not plan on enrolling for credit, make a compelling argument and explain how you will demonstrate your success in obtaining your learning objectives.

Method: Clearly describe how you plan to accomplish your project. Be as specific as possible. Examples of specific details include but are not limited to things like:

- In a research study, if you plan to conduct a survey, indicate how you will select a sample population and how you will analyze your data.
- In a community-based project, describe how you will identify the organization for which you will volunteer and how you will cover any costs associated with it.
- In a study abroad project, describe how you will identify a study abroad location, where you will live, and how you will fund your trip.
- In an internship project, describe your internship placement and how you will cover the costs of your internship.

Importance to Student: Explain why this project is important to you, and what role it plays in your development--personal, academic, and/or professional. In other words, how will this project transform you, or contribute to personal or professional goals. How will this Capstone enable you to make the connection between your undergraduate college career and your profession or post-graduate studies?

Role of Faculty/Professional Mentor(s): Explain in detail what role your faculty and/or professional mentor will play in facilitating your Capstone. What do you hope to gain from this mentor-protégé relationship? What plan do you have for communicating with your mentor?

Assessment: In collaboration with your faculty mentor, outline how your achievement of your learning objectives will be assessed. Detail what tangible artifacts documenting your learning
(e.g., manuscript, portfolio, showing, slides, etc.) will be produced and what role they will play in your assessment.

**Schedule and Estimated Completion Date:** Provide a specific timetable for implementing the various steps of your capstone project.
Honors Program Approval

If this is a research/scholarship/creative project or a community/service learning project, please obtain the signature of LouAnne Hawkins, the Coordinator of the Collaborative Undergraduate Scholarship Program.

I have consulted with this student about her/his research/scholarship/creative project or community/service learning project. I believe that this student can successfully complete this project as an Honors Capstone project.

Project Title: ___________________________________________________________________

LouAnne Hawkins:_____________________________________ Date: ____________________

If this is an internship project or a study abroad project, please obtain the signature of Dr. Mary Borg, the Director of the Honors Program

I have consulted with this student about her/his internship project. I believe that this student can successfully complete this project as an Honors Capstone project.

Project Title: ___________________________________________________________________

Mary Borg: ___________________________________________ Date: ____________________

If this is a study-abroad project, please obtain the signature of the coordinator of the study abroad trip or other study abroad experience.

I have consulted with this student about her/his study abroad project and I believe it is significant enough to count as an Honors Capstone project.

Project Title: ___________________________________________________________________

Name (Print): __________________________________________ Date: __________________

(Signature) __________________________________________
FACULTY/PROFESSIONAL MENTOR’S RECOMMENDATION

Please provide the Honors Capstone Committee with your recommendation for the Capstone experience of ___________________________________________. You may complete this recommendation by answering the following questions in a document and submitting the document in a sealed envelope to the Honors Office. Please sign the back of the envelope across the seal. Alternatively, you may submit your recommendation by answering these same questions online at http://……..

1. How long and in what capacity have you known the applicant?

2. How will this Capstone enable the student to demonstrate an integrated understanding of his/her field of study, apply the tools and methods of inquiry of his/her field, and/or enable him/her to generate new knowledge?

3. How will this Capstone enable the student to make the connection between his/her undergraduate college career and his/her profession or post-graduate studies?

4. What specifically do you hope the student will learn from engaging in this Capstone?

5. What specific products (e.g., manuscript, portfolio, showing, slides, etc.) will the student produce as evidence of achievement of this Capstone?

6. How will you assess this student’s progress during this Capstone experience?

7. Students completing their Capstone are expected to enroll in three to six hours of course credit. Please indicate below your willingness to assess this student’s progress in achieving the agreed upon learning objectives and assign a grade for course work.

   ____ I will supervise this student for two terms and assign grades for six hours of course credit.

   ____ I will supervise this student for one term and assign a grade for three hours of course credit.

   ____ The student is asking for a waiver of this requirement in his/her application. (Please outline what alternative means of assessment you will employ.)

8. Describe in detail your role in this Capstone project.

9. Is the student’s schedule and estimated date of completion reasonable given the project planned?