CAPSTONE EXPERIENCES

BGSU / Office of Academic Assessment

OVERVIEW

The Student Learning Analysts conducted focus groups to explore the understanding and thoughts that undergraduate students had about capstone experiences.

DATA COLLECTION

4 FOCUS GROUPS / **14** PARTICIPANTS

MAJOR THEMES

01/ UNDERSTANDING

Knowledge
Awareness

02/ PREPARATION

Faculty & Advisors
Peers
Coursework

03/ APPLICATION

Experiential Learning
In the Classroom
Student Life

04/ REACTIONS

Mindset & Attitude
Pressure
Stress as a Motivator

05/ POSITIVE OUTCOMES

Significance
Skills
Life & Career Preparation

06/ FEEDBACK

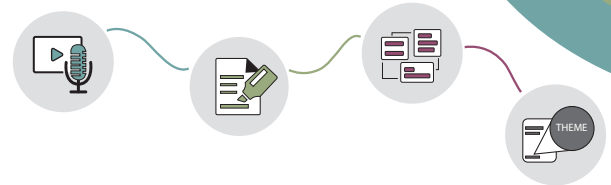Enhancing Awareness
Consistency
Ideal Capstone

DATA ANALYSIS

4 STEP PROCESS

01/ Transcription

02/ Open-coding

03/ Focus-coding

04/ Theme Identification

STUDENT QUOTES

" I think it's an opportunity to apply what they're learning into maybe an internship, job, or a research project. I think it's very interesting. "
APPLICATION / Experiential Learning

" For me it was a lot of pressure to try to take it on like with all the other classes that I need to finish this year so I can graduate on time, but it was also kind of exciting. "
REACTIONS / Pressure

" Yeah, I definitely think my capstone would definitely be something where I'm in control of everything. "
FEEDBACK / Ideal Capstone

Capstone Experiences Executive Summary

A group of Student Learning Analysts (SLAs), comprised of undergraduate students from a wide variety of class standings and majors, explored the topic of capstone experiences and signature work, based on information from the Association of American Colleges & Universities (AAC&U). The SLAs collaborated to develop questions for the focus group protocol and then tabled in the Bowen-Thompson Student Union to recruit participants. The SLAs facilitated four focus groups with a total of fourteen participants. Afterwards, the SLAs transcribed the focus groups and then went through a three-step coding process. These steps included: 1) open coding, 2) focused coding, and 3) an analysis of the focused coding to identify major themes. After combining the codes from each SLA, a master code list was created, and findings were brought to light. Six major themes emerged with subthemes, and selected quotes were extracted to provide tangible examples.

1. Understanding: Students discussed their current knowledge and awareness of capstone experiences.
   a. Knowledge: Students shared a wide variety of thoughts about their existing understanding and their experiences associated with the topic.
   b. Awareness: Students elaborated on how they came to their current knowledge, or lack thereof, of capstone experiences.

One participant defined a capstone: *[A] project or assignment or…some sort of assessment, which tests the culmination of all your skills and knowledge that you supposedly have learned leading up to your graduation as a final, 'are you ready to graduate or not yet'.* (T2, L17-20)

2. Preparation: Students discussed preparation by faculty, peers, and coursework as important aspects of learning about and preparing for their possible capstone experience.
   a. Faculty and Advisors: Participants communicated how faculty and advisors were or were not involved in students' capstone preparation process, and how it affected, or could possibly, affect the outcome of the project.
   b. Peers: Students believed that peer interaction could potentially add a different perspective to a capstone experience.
   c. Coursework: Participants made statements regarding how their coursework has prepared them to take on a capstone and how they may integrate what they are learning/learned into a culminating project, such as capstone.

A student mentioned: *I think that something that is really helpful, is in all of my education and Spanish classes so far, we've had projects that we practice integrating those aspects in, like, for example, in my education technology class right now…we, I just finished making a video that um, we got to choose anything we wanted, so I chose how to conjugate Spanish verbs. Um, with the endings -AR, -ER, and -IR, because I was like, this is something I will be applying, and the teacher obviously wanted us to apply it to our major, and so we practiced making videos like that and editing it and all that, and he's like, this will help you prepare for the EdTPA because I'm already learning the skills of how to edit the video and that kind of thing. So, it's like we integrate it into the classes this early on, so we get used to it.* (T3, L241-249)

3. Application: Participants explained how they are or will apply what they have learned over their four years in higher education into different culminating learning experiences, and how it could help transfer into a capstone project.
   a. Experiential Learning: These were identified as opportunities such as volunteering, internships, co-ops, or jobs that help students integrate what they have been learning to gain a mastery of the subject.
   b. In the Classroom: Participants spoke about their coursework and how it could be applied to a capstone or another culminating learning experience.
   c. Student Life: Students in focus groups stated that they were involved in either scholarship programs or student organizations where they could make a connection between how they could apply their experience from their organizations to a potential capstone.

A participant noted: *A lot of these like orgs and programs and things that students are involved in on campus aren't only like academic based, so they might be able to provide some insight into like the creative side of a capstone like working in an organization…I'm an ambassador [for a student organization] so I've been thinking about like how like a lot of my job involves creativity in terms of planning like voter engagement events on campus so I was thinking about like how can I use the skills I'm learning from this process and acclimating myself to this job to incorporate that creativity and event planning um type of experience into my capstone so it kind of provides like a creative side.* (T4, L266-273)

4. Reactions: Respondents discussed their general feelings and attitudes about capstones, regardless if their respective program mandated them to complete a capstone or not.
   a. Mindset and Attitude: Participants expressed a positive outlook when they addressed their plans for approaching their capstone projects.
   b. Pressure: This sub-theme emerged through two distinct criterion: (1) participants' negative reactions alongside and (2) an unclear plan of working through those negative feelings
   c. Stress as a Motivator: Participants' ability to articulate their intentions of working through their negative feelings to actively engage in their respective capstone projects.

A student shared: *For me it was a lot of pressure to try to take it on like with all the other classes that I need to finish this year so I can graduate on time. Um, but it was also kind of exciting because it's like the most independent you get to be. Setting up your own project and stuff.* (T4, L144-146)

5. Positive Outcomes: Participants discussed a variety of beneficial aspects of capstone experiences.
   a. Significance: Participants detailed why they think a capstone experience is important to their academic experience at BGSU.
   b. Skills: Participants highlighted that capstone experiences allowed for the opportunity to gain valuable skills for their future endeavors.
   c. Life and Career Preparation: Participants explained that capstones, and the experiences that are associated with the different types within their program, allowed for the opportunity to explore career paths, feel confident in their career decision, and prepare for life after completing their undergraduate degree.

A participant mentioned: *...for the show I had to you know, make every frame myself. Um, like buy all the materials myself and I guess it's just like a really realistic way if I want to like continue to show my work after I graduate I guess this is a similar experience to what I have to do, so I guess that it's just a good preparatory thing. Also, ...[it] taught me how to work on a deadline, a more formal way of being critiqued by like professors and stuff, so it was kinda just like a more so than my intro art classes, like a real-world experience of how it might be if I'm showing my work in the future, so I thought that was pretty beneficial.* (T4, L94-100)

6. Feedback: Participants provided the SLAs with feedback pertaining to capstone experiences.
   a. Enhancing Awareness: Participants communicated a desire for increased faculty support in their academic programs to enhance awareness of capstone experiences.
   b. Consistency: Participants communicated that all academic programs throughout BGSU should incorporate some sort of capstone experience.
   c. Ideal Capstone: Participants provided the SLAs with what they believe are ideal characteristics of capstone experiences.

A student noted: *I think hands-on ones are, so like the performance or a co-op uh creating a large project. Doing a research paper or something that's just very school related not necessarily unless you're going on into a really hard or like if you want to be a professor. That's the only place where that's really useful compared to business worlds where most people end up working.* (T1, L53-56)

For a copy of the full report, please contact Dr. Jessica Turos, Associate Director, Office of Academic Assessment at jmturos@bgsu.edu.