

# Articles

## Are We Overlooking (and Underselling) the Writing Capstone Course?

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Rhetoric and composition has made immeasurable strides in the design of undergraduate writing major programs, but the discipline lacks a clear picture of the culminating capstone course that serves as an end point for the writing major. This article reports on a content analysis of 54 writing capstone syllabi from 44 different institutions, highlighting course descriptions, course outcomes, and assigned textbooks. These findings demonstrate the need to move conversations about the capstone beyond our local program concerns. Toward that end, we offer several recommendations for capstone course design and implementation.

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### Introduction

The vast majority of undergraduate writing majors requires a capstone course. In 2008, Deborah Balzhiser and Susan McLeod created a map of commonalities across 68 programs with a writing major. They found that 90 percent of majors had some sort of capstone experience, defined variously by a specific capstone course, an internship, or a seminar with a portfolio. Among those programs with professional/rhetorical writing majors, students completed a project designed for career preparation or a practicum (420). In 2017, the National Census on Writing found that respondents from 246 institutions reported their institutions having a writing major (Gladstein and Fralix). Given that respondents from 79 schools reported their “institution require[s] ALL students [to] complete a senior thesis or other writing-intensive capstone experience,” we can certainly speculate that a large proportion of the over-200 writing majors includes a capstone course of some kind.

Despite the capstone course’s prevalence in writing curricula, we have an unclear picture of the options for what a writing capstone can be and the variety of approaches to the course. Indeed, while the past two decades have shown a remarkable increase in scholarship regarding programs for writing majors generally (Alexander et al.; Everett and Hanganu-Bresch; Giberson and Moriarty; Shamoan et al.), including special issues of this journal in 2007 and 2015, the capstone course has received scant scholarly attention. Moreover, there appears

to be great program-to-program variability in how the course is designed and presented. With a clearer picture of the aggregate approaches to the capstone, we believe the discipline can work toward identifying frameworks and practices for our undergraduate majors, while accounting for local contexts and meeting student learning outcomes (one of the charges of the CCCC Committee on the Major in Writing and Rhetoric). To that end, we present below the results of a content analysis of syllabi from writing capstone courses around the country, focusing in particular on course descriptions, course objectives, and assigned readings. These results indicate possible options for moving conversations about the capstone beyond our individual departments. For example, our study of 54 syllabi from 44 institutions found a range of 32 different textbooks across subspecialties (see Appendix A). This range of content for capstone readings suggests the continued relevance of Balzhiser and McLeod's concern about the undergraduate writing major over a decade ago: that "we have little consensus about what a writing major should look like" (420). One way to develop our shared understanding of the writing major may be through considering how the writing major should culminate in the capstone. This descriptive study of program materials is a starting point for developing a clearer picture of the capstone courses for writing majors.

### Literature Review and Exigence

The past two decades have shown a remarkable increase in scholarship regarding programs for writing majors. Since Kathleen Blake Yancey invoked the writing major in her 2004 CCCC Chair's address, we have seen the formation of the Committee on the Major in Rhetoric and Composition, special journal issues (*Composition Studies* 2007, 2015), and edited collections on the major (Alexander et al.; Everett and Hanganu-Bresch<sup>1</sup>; Giberson and Moriarty<sup>2</sup>; Shamoan et al.<sup>3</sup>). Despite its presence since the 1970s, the capstone course has been an underdeveloped component of this conversation, though several contemporary scholars do acknowledge its significance. Most recently, Laurie E. Gries has argued that advanced composition courses, including the capstone course, are good venues to "better educate students in the *techné* of social activism" (330). Pointing to the uptick in student activism nationally, Gries encourages writing programs to give students the opportunity to "invent, design, and implement social activist campaigns that respond to shared matters of concern and seek to assemble local bodies into collective action" (332-33). The majority of discussion about the capstone, however, has focused on the course's function within a curriculum. For example, Dan Royer and Ellen Schendel have discussed the central role the capstone plays in the Grand Valley State program, and Judith Kearns and Brian Turner documented an unsuccessful capstone course at The University of Winnipeg.

Only recently has there been some attention to the capstone as reflecting the discipline, notably in Lisa Melonçon and Joanna Schreiber's 2015 study of capstones in technical and professional writing programs. More commonly, the capstone makes a cameo appearance as part of the vertical curriculum (Jamieson) or as an ambiguously defined course among many options (Baker and Henning 164; Bradley et al. 172; Brooks et al. 40; DelliCarpini 34; Everett and Hanganu-Bresch 126, 138, 169; Lowe and Macauley 86; McLeod 288; Peebles et al. 75; Shmoon, et al.; Sylvia et al. 186).

The capstone course has always had a presence in scholarship on the major; however, it has been muted and oblique. The capstone's assumed purpose is culmination—to pull together everything in the curriculum in one climactic final course—but how the capstone came to have this purpose has not been clearly articulated in our scholarship. Nor has there been a broader effort to study how rhetoric and composition as a discipline envisions or delivers the capstone course. The capstone clearly has a place in the writing major, but clarifying the capstone experience and accounting for the diverse visions for it remain unanswered challenges.

A lack of scholarly discussion about what the capstone is, or ought to be, is not completely unique to our field. Yet some researchers in other disciplines have begun assessing their approach to the capstone. Much of the discipline-specific capstone research remains atomized, often based on case studies at a single institution rather than surveys across multiple institutions,<sup>4</sup> and it appears that only the field of engineering has published a book-length treatise on the capstone.<sup>5</sup> However, in the past decade, research on capstone courses in general and across multiple institutions has been the subject of a number of reports (Padgett and Kilgo; Schermer and Gray) and a 2013 special issue of *Peer Review* (a journal focused on higher education).

Robert C. Hauhart and Jon E. Grahe's *Designing and Teaching Undergraduate Capstone Courses* (2015) provides the most recent comprehensive review of research and scholarship on the undergraduate capstone course. Hauhart and Grahe identify the course's role in the undergraduate curriculum, its characteristics, and common impediments, and they set forth guidelines and best practices for educators. Estimating that capstone courses are offered in 81 percent of higher education institutions in the United States, Hauhart and Grahe loosely define the course thusly: "As the culminating experience for students' undergraduate careers, the capstone is intended to tie together previous courses in theory, method, and substantive knowledge within most disciplines" (42). In addition to tying everything together, Hauhart and Grahe continue, "Capstone courses also provide students with a final opportunity to demonstrate their mastery of important skills before they graduate" (x). We agree that the most robust capstones seem to be the ones that balance integra-

tion of disciplinary knowledge and demonstration of mastered skills. We do not believe all the features and goals identified by Hauhart and Grahe should be considered the gold standard for capstones, irrespective of discipline; however, they do offer a persuasive set of criteria to consider whether writing capstone courses are culminating learning experiences or “a sort of ... half-gesture, a not fully articulated after-thought” (104). We used Hauhart and Grahe’s criteria to inform the coding framework of this descriptive study.

## Methods

We set out to lay an empirical groundwork for future considerations of what the writing capstone ought to be, include, and do. To that end, we decided to assemble a composite picture of the contemporary writing capstone course based on available course syllabi.<sup>6</sup> During the initial phase of our work, we requested a list of “writing major” programs from Sandra Jamieson (Chair, CCCC Committee on the Major in Writing and Rhetoric), generated a contact list from the 141 programs identified by CCCC, and visited institutional websites to verify, or identify, a point of contact recommended by, and active, in CCCC.<sup>7</sup> After identifying 133 institutions with a writing major, we emailed the contacts to request materials. After two rounds of queries, we collected 54 capstone syllabi from 44 institutions (see Appendix B).<sup>8</sup> We conducted a content analysis of these syllabi using a coding scheme informed by the features identified as typical by Hauhart and Grahe (see Table 1). Discussion of assignments and projects is outside the scope of this article to maintain our focus on the broader features of the course: course descriptions, course outcomes, and assigned major readings.

Table 1: Findings

<b>Programs</b>	<b>% of Total Syllabi</b>	<b>N Syllabi</b>	<b>N Institutions</b>
Writing Major	61	33	27
Emphasis, track, concentration, or option	31.5	17	15
Certificate programs	7.5	4	2
<b>Program Types</b>	<b>% of Total Syllabi</b>	<b>N Syllabi</b>	<b>N Institutions</b>
Professional/Technical Writing (PTW)	29.6	16	15
Rhetoric & Writing (RW)	26	14	12

Rhetoric & Writing (RW) and Professional/Technical Writing (PTW)	16.7	9	6
Creative Writing (CW)	11.1	6	5
Creative Writing (CW) and Professional/Technical Writing (PTW)	7.4	4	2
General Writing	3.7	2	2
Literature and Writing	3.7	2	1
Creative Writing (CW) and Literature	1.8	1	1

<b>Course Types</b>	<b>% of Total Syllabi</b>	<b>N Syllabi</b>	<b>N Institutions</b>
Culminating Capstone (per H&G)	57	31	24
Senior seminars	17	9	7
Portfolio workshops	13	7	7
Creative writing work- shops	9	5	4
Thesis	2	1	1
Internship or a thesis	2	1	1

<b>Stated Purposes</b>	<b>% of Total Syllabi</b>	<b>N Syllabi</b>	<b>N Institutions</b>
Career Preparation	24.1	13	13
Graduate School	20.4	11	9
Career Preparation and Graduate School	20.4	11	11
Graduate School and Publication	11.1	6	3
Unclear	11	6	5
Other	9.3	5	2
Publication	3.7	2	1

## Findings

Capstone courses vary widely by department, instructor, and even multiple class sections with the same instructor. Thus, we note quantities of both syl-

labi and their origin institutions. We do not venture into claims about how a given department teaches the writing capstone. Rather, the syllabi provided to us suggest how the course is presented, taught, and valued in conjunction with particular writing curricula; these inferences, in turn, provide useful insight into how the writing capstone is approached across the country and in different institutional contexts.

Geographically, for example, the institutions in our sample are concentrated in the Northeast and lacking in the Southwest, but most of the United States is represented (see Appendix B for the full list). Approximately two-thirds of the institutions in our study are public and one-third is private (see Table 2). Specifically, our data set includes 32 syllabi from 28 public institutions; of these public-institution syllabi, 16 are from 15 state or state-related institutions, 9 from as many research institutions, 3 from as many public land-grant universities, 3 from a public liberal arts university, and 1 from a community college.<sup>9</sup> In addition, 22 syllabi are from 16 private institutions. Of these, 16 syllabi are from 11 liberal arts universities and colleges, 4 are from 3 religiously affiliated intuitions, and 2 are from as many research universities. Combining public and private institutions, our data set includes 17 syllabi from 11 liberal arts institutions and 10 from as many research institutions. The syllabi are dated from 2011 to Spring 2018 with the majority (38 of the 48 dated syllabi) falling between 2016 and 2018.

Table 2: Institution Types

<b>Institution Type</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Public	28	64
<i>State or State-related</i>	15	34
<i>Research</i>	9	20
<i>Land-grant</i>	3	7
<i>Liberal Arts</i>	3	7
<i>Community College</i>	1	2
Private	16	36
<i>Liberal Arts</i>	11	25
<i>Religious</i>	3	7
<i>Research</i>	2	5

These capstones function within and across a variety of degree plans. The vast majority of syllabi, 91 percent, are intended for courses to be taken ex-

clusively by writing students, as opposed to capstones designed for all English majors (regardless of focus area) working individually in their respective fields. Not surprisingly, 61 percent of syllabi cap off a writing major, and 31.5 percent are part of an emphasis, track, concentration, or option (plus four syllabi come from two certificate programs). Concerning the sub-specialties within writing majors, we categorized the syllabi in three groups—Rhetoric & Writing (RW), Professional/Technical Writing (PTW), and Creative Writing (CW)—although we identified a small number as General Writing, Literature and Writing, and Literature and Creative Writing. Most of the syllabi emphasized PTW (30 percent), RW (26 percent), and a combined focus on RW and PTW (17 percent).<sup>10</sup> Less common capstones include CW, a dual focus on PTW and CW, General Writing, Literature and Writing, and Literature and CW.

Most syllabi we studied clearly demarcated their “course descriptions” from their “learning outcomes,” the former as the initial paragraph(s) below the catalog information, the latter appearing as a bullet list below the course description; however, these lists sometimes included additional description of the course or of assignments, and the above paragraph(s) sometimes contained learning outcomes. We therefore coded based on the presence/absence of descriptions and outcomes no matter where they appeared in the documents.

## Analysis

Ultimately, we document here what many of us had surmised over the past decade based on conversations with colleagues and the emerging scholarship on the writing major: these courses appear to meet the needs of their respective programs, sending newly minted writing majors off to the workforce or graduate school. Programs appear to offer a mostly culminating learning experience that combines elements of traditional capstone courses, professional internships, extensive research projects, and student portfolios. A majority of the courses—57 percent—match many of the features for which we were looking (see Table 2). Based on our reading of these documents, many capstones, however, only approximate what Hauhart and Grahe would call a *true capstone* course, such as senior-level courses dedicated to longer pieces of writing (e.g., creative writing workshops) or more advanced content (e.g., special-topic seminars). In total, 17 percent of syllabi are senior seminars, 13 percent are portfolio workshops, 9 percent are creative writing workshops, 2 percent require a thesis, and 2 percent can be either an internship or a thesis. While the discipline appears to be generally accomplishing its curricular goals through the capstone course, we should consider whether we are missing key opportunities to highlight the course as a culminating learning experience. Stated purposes, goals, and descriptions as well as course learning outcomes could be more clearly articulated, and skills development might be overem-

phasized. Rather than just echoing the learning outcomes from introductory courses (e.g., “Demonstrate skill in revising, editing, designing, and critical thinking”), capstone syllabi could instead take a broader view of curriculum (e.g., “integrate the skills and knowledge acquired throughout the program of study into a portfolio of diverse texts for sharing and showcasing to the university community and beyond”). After all, the inclusion of integrative learning is really what distinguishes the capstone course from others. In addition, we should consider other opportunities around required readings. While our descriptive study reflects the diversity of writing capstones and majors, we hope that the range of options prompts future consideration of, and deliberation about, what readings will support integrative learning.

### *Course Descriptions*

The syllabus is an important, if not the most important, text that students are given for understanding the capstone course. It needs to clearly articulate to students the purpose and components of the capstone (Hauhart and Grahe 193-94). After all, Anis S. Bawarshi and Mary Jo Reiff refer to the syllabus as a “meta-genre,” setting the parameters for all other texts produced in and for a course (94, 99). It is worth emphasizing that we should dedicate extensive time and energy into getting the language just right in this meta-genre to best represent the course to our multiple audiences—students, colleagues, and administrators. Course descriptions, often presented as a paragraph or two on the first page of the syllabus, are an opportunity to engage readers and clearly explain the purposes, goals, and approach of the course and to reinforce audience understanding of the capstone’s role in the curriculum.<sup>11</sup>

We found that preparation for life post-graduation is the most commonly stated purpose for these syllabi, the specifics of which depend largely on sub-specialty. Twenty-four percent of syllabi clearly aim to prepare students for entering the workforce, 20 percent prepare students to apply to graduate programs, and 20 percent prepare students for entering the workforce and/or applying to graduate school (depending on the future plans and goals of individual students). The future-oriented purposes in 64 percent of the syllabi, then, pertain to career preparation and/or graduate school. A syllabus from Boise State, for example, asks students to “[p]roduce a professional writing portfolio to show potential employers or gain admission to graduate school.” Portfolios in the PTW capstone at John Carroll are “expected to demonstrate ... readiness to transition from college to the workplace and/or to graduate school.” Each of these programs require students to look to their futures and attempt to prepare them for the next steps ahead.

Not surprisingly, there is a strong correlation between professional development and Professional/Technical Writing (PTW): 77 percent of the



career-preparation syllabi are PTW, whereas none of the graduate-school syllabi are PTW-only capstones. Generally, capstones in Rhetoric & Writing (RW) and RW-PTW swayed more toward graduate-school preparation or offered a balanced focus between the workforce and graduate school. Eighty-eight percent of the syllabi that aim to prepare students for the workforce, graduate school, or both are PTW, RW, and RW- PTW. In contrast, we observed that capstones intended to prepare students for potential publication in some way (in conjunction with either career prep or grad school) were more likely to be Creative Writing (CW) capstones. For example, the CW capstone at Eastern Mennonite asks students to “devote their time and talents to creating a coherent collection of work (or single longer work) appropriate for graduate application and publication in literary or professional venues.”

The more compelling, comprehensive course descriptions, however, clearly introduce the capstone as a culminating experience during which students reflect on their past learning with a vision of their post-graduation future. For example, a syllabus from Montana State introduces the writing capstone like this:

“Senior Seminar.” “Capstone.” “Research Seminar.” Whatever you like to call it, it’s the place where you Put It All Together (*it all being whatever you’ve been learning along the way*), where you demonstrate your ability to Write Big Things..., where we make sure you have the tools and habits to make your way in the world as A Writer..., and where you demonstrate what your years in the major have let you learn and produce, via a professional online portfolio.

This description, in our opinion, effectively frames the course. It engages the student and articulates a clear set of past- (“what you’ve been learning along the way”) and future-oriented (“to make your way in the world as A Writer”) purposes for the course.

As effective as such examples may be, we found that only 48 percent of the syllabi collected announce themselves or strongly present themselves as culminating learning experiences, despite the prevailing wisdom that culmination is the defining characteristic of the capstone course. While some course catalogs on program websites refer to the course as the culmination of the curriculum, many of the syllabi do not do so explicitly. One consequence of a professional-development understanding of the capstone is the risk that the course could be regarded by students (and perhaps even faculty) as just a portfolio workshop on the students’ way out the door. Articulating through the course description how the capstone course is intended to be more than

a professional development after-thought is one way capstone instructors can avoid undercutting the broader takeaways of the course.

### *Course Outcomes*

Course learning outcomes, much like the syllabus itself, are also a kind of meta-genre providing “the shared vocabulary for assigning, producing, reflecting on, and assessing student writing” (Bawarshi and Reiff 94). Enumerating the specific demonstrable skills and knowledge that students will develop in capstone courses communicates to students what they will be able to do and know in completing the course. Our analysis of collected syllabi reminds us that a bulleted list does not a set of learning outcomes make; many of the learning outcomes listed are actually descriptions of assignments (e.g., “Launch a credible professional portfolio in an online space”). Similarly, just because a course description includes culminating language does not automatically mean that culmination is being assessed. Learning outcomes—when they are included—reveal upfront to students how a program defines *culminating*, how exactly the capstone provides coherence and justification for the rest of the curriculum.

While less than half of all syllabi collected present their courses as culminating learning experiences, less than half of *those* list, or otherwise identify, the integration of disciplinary knowledge as a learning outcome.<sup>12</sup> Put another way, only 22 percent of the collected syllabi appear to define *culminating* as integrative. Many higher-education researchers identify the capstone as a key opportunity for integrative learning: as Jillian Kinzie affirms, “From their inception . . . capstones were intended to foster integration” (29). Moreover, the Association of American Colleges and Universities’ Integrative Learning V.A.L.U.E. Rubric defines integrative learning as “an understanding and a disposition that a student builds across the curriculum and co-curriculum, from making simple connections among ideas and experiences to synthesizing and transferring learning to new, complex situations within and beyond the campus” (“Integrative”). The values of integrative learning certainly align with our existing discussion of capstones, but based on our sample, those values may perhaps play out more in the classroom than in the written documents that support it.

Rebecca S. Nowacek similarly discusses integrative learning in *Agents of Integration: Understanding Transfer as a Rhetorical Act*, identifying it as “a broad range of connections between classes and curricular activities” and subsuming integrative learning under the broader concept of transfer (2). The ideal type of integration is “successful integration,” which describes “those instances in which students consciously see a connection and successfully sell it to their audience” (41). Successful integration of learning and knowledge occurs when

a student is consciously aware of, and has the discursive tools to articulate, a connection between contexts—and can effectively convey this connection to an audience as such. Such an achievement reflects a rhetorical act of metacognition. In the context of a capstone course, students could be explicitly asked to practice “successful integration” in any number of discursive formations: by making connections and insights across the writing curriculum and articulating those connections for their instructor in assignments such as a semester-long project and reflective essays.

Successful (or integrative) learning in the capstone can and should play a role, but we found that only one in four syllabi we examined articulated an integrative learning outcome. Substantive learning outcomes include those from a Ball State syllabus, which asked students to “reflect upon their development as readers, writers and critical thinkers and to summarize and synthesize the skills they have learned through their education as English majors.” In a Montana State capstone, students’ work on a semester-length project, complete extensive readings, and pursue professional development in order to “convince you and me that you have done your work in this major, and that it has done its work in you.” Writing students in a Washington State capstone probe the digital transformation of English, “explor[ing] how the skills and approaches that English majors have learned studying literature, rhetoric, and creative writing can engage the complexities and opportunities of digital technologies.” And writing majors in a University of Central Florida course “reflect on disciplinary identity, possible career trajectories, and transferrable strategies for writing in their lives.” These learning outcomes show that integrative learning can be presented in various ways: by reflecting on previous coursework as well as synthesizing and applying curricular knowledge to new contexts, situations, and topics in greater depth than in other courses.

While there is value in including the development of key skills for writing majors as a capstone outcome alongside synthesizing the knowledge gained from other courses, we are wary of the overwhelming emphasis on skills via the quantity of skills outcomes. The most commonly stated learning outcomes we found were the development of various cognitive and rhetorical skills (e.g., critical thinking, writing, revising, speaking, presenting). Compared to the 22 percent that list integration of disciplinary knowledge as an outcome, 54 percent list at least one learning outcome that can be described as skills development. The skills outcome appears most frequently in syllabi for PTW, RW, and RW-PTW capstones, although CW, General Writing, and hybrid Literature/Writing capstones also listed skills-development outcomes. For example, the learning outcomes on one syllabus include the following:

Demonstrate skill in revising, editing, designing, and critical thinking; Demonstrate skill in textual analysis; Conduct academic research using primary and secondary sources; Collaborate with others ... Apply stylistic and rhetorical analysis ... Significantly revise a text [for a] ... new argument.

Many of these outcomes echo those of intermediate, if not introductory, composition courses, which makes sense because writers should be continually honing these skills. These outcomes do *implicitly* ask students to practice metacognition but there should also be reflective, integrative language regarding what the mastery of these skills means—the kind of successful integration characteristic of a capstone course. Undergraduate majors at the end of their studies should continue to develop as lifelong learners, but an emphasis on skills acquisition should be presented alongside an equal emphasis on the conscious knowledge of their integration. Without a push for metacognition, emphasizing further skills development alone reinforces the perception of the capstone as *just another course* and misses the opportunity for integrating the learning that comprises the degree.

### Readings

Despite the natural emphasis in a capstone course on assignments and semester-long projects, many capstone courses have “common reading lists” (Hauhart and Grahe 53). In our sample, a majority of syllabi—76 percent—list required readings, such as a stylebook or textbook and/or scholarly and popular-press articles. The majority of the textbooks we found are either general writing-related textbooks or RW-related textbooks. Among these readings, there is little consensus on what should be required reading, reflecting the diversity of writing capstones and majors, though some textbooks appear multiple times. For example, textbooks that appear on two or more syllabi include *Portfolio Keeping: A Guide for Students* by Nedra Reynolds and Elizabeth Davis (3rd edition), and Rich Rice (2nd edition); *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft* by Stephen King; *The Non-Designer’s Design Book* by Robin Williams; Aristotle’s *Poetics*; and the *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*. We include the full list of titles in Appendix A to illustrate the breadth of titles in different areas.

Reviewing the readings in this sample reveals opportunities to think strategically about the capstone’s place in the writing curriculum. While we would be loath to prescribe a canon of capstone texts, we are encouraged to see the emergence of works designed specifically for our undergraduate writing majors and hope to see similar energies devoted to further textbooks, readers, and open-access resources. For example, while not assigned as reading in any of the

syllabi collected, we are heartened by the publication of textbooks designed for undergraduate writing research, such as Lynée Lewis Gaillet and Michelle F. Eble's *Primary Research and Writing: People, Places, and Spaces* (2016) and Joyce Kinkead's *Researching Writing: An Introduction to Research Methods* (2016), the latter explicitly identifying its usefulness for students "undertaking capstone or thesis projects that focus on writing" (xvii). As Kinkead explains, "Capstone experiences in the baccalaureate may include a culminating portfolio, honors thesis, research grant, conference proposal, design project, or exhibition. The goal is for the student writer to move from general academic writing to career-driven tasks" (96). Marshaling our disciplinary resources toward a clearer understanding of the informed approaches to the capstone experience may help us move the academic writing major into a clearer curricular space for careers after graduation, whatever they might be, and the diverse publics for which they might write (Ervin).

## Conclusions and Recommendations

As we suspected at the outset, the writing capstone largely appears designed to meet the needs of both writing majors (the students) and the writing major (the curricula). For the most part, our snapshot of the course does not reveal "a sort of . . . half-gesture, a not fully articulated after-thought" (Hauhart and Grahe 104). Based on a holistic assessment of the course descriptions, learning outcomes, and readings, the writing capstone is, primarily, a qualitatively different course from the rest of the curriculum, neither just another course nor a professional-development after-thought.

Despite the general trend toward capstones being truly culminating, we see opportunities to solidify the strengths and innovations in capstone course design and identify areas for improvement. Based on our understanding of capstone research and our analysis of writing major capstones across the country, we think programs aspiring to align their capstone courses with common disciplinary practices might consider the following recommendations.

- Writing-program administrators and capstone instructors should invest ample time, energy, and deliberation in the design of capstone syllabi for all stakeholders in the course.
- Syllabi should foreground and clarify the goals, purposes, learning outcomes, and roles the capstone course plays as a culminating experience for students and all that entails.
- The capstone course should be articulated within the program design of the major, clarifying the aims and outcomes of the degree they are completing.

- The context of the course should be more broadly situated in the field(s) it serves, whether RW, PTW, or CW.

The course readings and assignments should be framed within these contexts for students to orient their thinking beyond the singular course experience and reinforce the culminating aspirations of the capstone. While these features are undoubtedly present in capstone courses beyond the syllabus document, we believe that the focus on syllabi can be a touchstone for program-level and larger disciplinary discussions about the major, making our tacit understanding of the capstone visible for all stakeholders. Along the way, we need to ensure that the capstone is not the sole venue for connections across the major: “If we want students who vary in abilities, backgrounds, identities, and dispositions to make meaningful connections between ideas in the major, the opportunity for that connection-making can’t be delayed until the capstone course” (Hall et al.).

We can certainly continue to design capstone courses based on how they have been designed in the past or how colleagues at neighboring institutions design theirs, but we should also work toward developing a clearer set of common-practice resources for the writing capstone course while simultaneously embracing the work of other disciplines—those that have begun this work already (e.g., sociology, psychology, communication, education)—to inform the way we envision and implement our culminating course. We should account for the distinctions not just regarding whether an internship should “count” as a capstone course (Balzhiser and McLeod 428),<sup>13</sup> but to what extent the writing capstone should adhere to, or depart from, the features identified by Hauhart and Grahe. The question becomes: How can the writing capstone retain our principles and best practices while we also, taking stock of research on the capstone across the disciplines, seize opportunities to better present, articulate, design, teach, and theorize this course’s place in the writing major and the discipline? Moving forward, we believe writing faculty should continue to question—intentionally, reflexively, and collaboratively—how we present these culminating experiences for our majors through asking questions such as:

- What are the goals of the capstone?
- How does the curriculum prepare students to undertake the capstone course?
- Who will teach it?
- How much autonomy will each instructor be permitted?
- Will it be a single course or a sequence?
- Who will be eligible to take it?
- How will the readings support the learning outcomes and goals?
- How often will it be revisited for potential redesign?

- How will we research the capstone's current effectiveness and lasting impact for alumni?<sup>14</sup>
- Will current writing majors have the opportunity to contribute to course design?

Future research needs to examine the capstone assignments and semester-long projects in greater detail because, especially for research-based capstones, such projects are often the most important deliverable and the central focus of the course. Indeed, the inherent difficulty of discussing the capstone course is that it is designed to facilitate individualized, student-selected projects. In the same way that T.J. Geiger II differentiates between the writing major as curriculum and writing majors as students (108), we value the distinction between the writing capstone course and the writing capstone projects created by students. We envision future work that considers the student side of the equation: reviewing student artifacts created in these capstone classes and interviewing them about their experiences. Familiar with the truisms of distinguishing product from process—apparatus from practice—we entered this discussion realizing that an examination of syllabi could appear at cross purposes for understanding the writing capstone as it actually plays out in the lives of our students. However, as always, we must be mindful of the parameters we set for, and present to, our students. We need to ensure that the syllabus enables students the flexibility to pursue rewarding, interesting, and important lines of inquiry while also providing productive pathways to guide their creativity, critical thought, and rhetorical adaptability.

## Notes

1. *Minefield of Dreams: Triumphs and Travails of Independent Writing Programs* (2016) offers more recent glimpses into capstone courses as examples or touchstones for local programmatic concerns—unfortunately without broader discussion of the role of the capstone itself (see Royer and Schendel; MacDonald et al.; Rhoades et al.; Thaiss et al.; and Kearns and Turner).

2. More than half of the contributors to *What We Are Becoming* (2010) mention capstone courses, with some instances appearing in the context of program designs (see Brooks et al.; Lowe and Macauley; Baker and Henning; Courtney et al.). . . . Presciently, Susan H. McLeod concludes in the afterword, “Once we have begun to discuss outcomes, we can then discuss what the gateway course to the major should be . . . and what the capstone course or experience should be” (288).

3. In their pioneering framework for an advanced writing curriculum in *Coming of Age: The Advanced Writing Curriculum* (2000), Shamooin et al. posit a configuration of courses that “provide writing students with a historical and theoretical awareness of writing as a discipline; that prepare students for careers as writers; and that prepare them for using writing as a means of participating in the public sphere” (xv). In doing so, they implicate capstone experiences rooted variously in theory, practice,

research, and career preparation. In their contributions to the collection, H. Brooke Hessler discusses a capstone course in which writing majors “collaborate with community members to identify and fulfill opportunities for contributing to constructive communication practices” (Hessler); Libby Miles describes her publishing capstone course for a professional and creative writing emphasis within an English major (CD, para. 5); and Kathleen McCormick and Donald C. Jones describe a capstone that integrates reading and writing based on composition theory, literacy, and cultural studies.

4. For exceptions in communication, see Rosenberry and Vicker, and in religious studies, see Upson-Saia.

5. See Hoffman, for example.

6. Gries has already begun making the case for ways the writing capstone course can serve larger rhetorical, civic goals for students.

7. We used the CCCC list as opposed to the NSW list because it contains a complete list (i.e., no anonymous responses).

8. Two capstones were eliminated from our total because they were actually literary studies or communication studies syllabi. When multiple syllabi were provided as part of a multi-semester capstone sequence, we counted each as one syllabus/course.

9. All but one institution in our study is a four-year college or university. The outlier—Northern Virginia Community College—may be one of only a few community colleges that offer a writing capstone, which suggests that the role of the capstone course in two-year writing programs should be explored in future scholarship on writing-major curricula. We included NVCC in our study, despite its outlier status, because our aim was to document current practices across all institutions (to the extent that we could collect writing-capstone syllabi volunteered from across the country).

10. Some capstones emphasized one field of writing studies while being in a degree plan in another field.

11. Just as it is important to clearly explain for students that the capstone is a culminating learning experience, it is important that syllabi (if applicable) explain that the student deliverables in the capstone are used for programmatic/departmental assessment because it can help give students a clear sense of the larger purpose of the course. Despite this, only four syllabi from three institutions explicitly state that the capstone is used for assessment purposes. Of course, we suspect that more than two of these capstone courses are indeed used for internal assessment.

12. One syllabus required integrated learning for a minor assignment but was not overall a culmination of the curriculum.

13. Balzhiser and McLeod noted “some debate” among the members of the CCCC Committee on the Major in Rhetoric and Composition about whether the for-credit internship “counts” as a capstone (428).

14. See Weisser and Grobman’s survey work with writing majors, which led to changes in their capstone course design (55). They write, “To better understand the ways in which their undergraduate programs shaped and influenced those alumni and how those alumni might re-shape and influence our programs, it is important to speak with them directly, through interviews, surveys, and questionnaires” (41).



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## Appendix A: Capstone Textbooks Arranged by Subspecialty

### General Writing

- *Portfolio Keeping: A Guide for Students* by Nedra Reynolds and Rich Rice
- *Acts of Revision: A Guide for Writers* by Wendy Bishop and Hans Ostrom
- *Crafting a Life in Essay, Story, Poem* by Donald M. Murray
- *Understanding Style: Practical Ways to Improve Your Writing* by Joe Glaser
- *Spunk & Bite: A Writer's Guide to Bold, Contemporary Style* by Arthur Plotnik
- *Around the Writer's Block: Using Brain Science to Solve Writer's Resistance* by Rosanne Bane
- *How to Write a B.A. Thesis* by Charles Lipson
- *Rewriting: How to Do Things with Texts* by Joseph Harris
- *Team Writing: A Guide to Working in Groups* by Joanna Wolfe

### Rhetoric and Writing (RW)

- *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft* by Stephen King
- *Poetics* by Aristotle
- *Professional and Public Writing* by Linda S. Coleman and Robert W. Funk
- *Rhetoric: A User's Guide* by John Ramage
- *The History and Theory of Rhetoric* by James A. Herrick
- *The Rhetorical Tradition* by Patricia Bizzell and Bruce Herzberg
- *Still Life with Rhetoric: A New Materialist Approach for Visual Rhetorics* by Laurie E. Gries
- *Rhetorical Criticism: Exploration and Practice* by Sonja K. Foss
- *What Writing Does and How it Does it* by Charles Bazerman and Paul Prior
- *Becoming a Writing Researcher* by Ann Blakeslee and Cathy Fleischer
- *Macroanalysis: Digital Methods and Literary History* by Matthew L. Jockers
- *Rhetoric and the Digital Humanities* by Jim Ridolfo and William Hart-Davidson
- *The Only Grant-Writing Book You'll Ever Need* by Ellen Karsh and Arlen Sue Fox

### *Professional/Technical Writing (PTW)*

- *The Non-Designer's Design Book* by Robin Williams
- *Writing a Professional Life: Stories of Technical Communicators On and Off the Job* by G.J. Savage and D.L. Sullivan
- *Document Design: A Guide for Technical Communicators* by Miles Kimball and Ann R. Hawkins
- *The Non-Designer's Web Book* by Robin Williams and John Tollett
- *Professional Writing and Rhetoric* by Tim Peeples
- *Portfolios for Technical and Professional Communicators* by Herb Smith and Kim Haimes Korn
- *Practical Strategies for Technical Communication* by Mike Markel

### *Creative Writing (CW)*

- *Creative Writer's Handbook* by Jason and Lefcowitz
- *On Writing* by Stephen King (listed twice to reflect use in RW and CW capstones)
- *A Writer's Journey* by Christopher Vogler

### **Appendix B: Institutions Included in Study**

1. Ball State U
2. Boise State U
3. Briar Cliff U
4. Clemson U
5. DePaul U
6. Eastern Mennonite U
7. Eastern Michigan U
8. Eastern Oregon U
9. Georgia State U
10. Grand Valley State U
11. Ithaca College
12. James Madison U
13. John Carrol U
14. Kutztown U of Pennsylvania
15. Metropolitan State U-Denver
16. Michigan State U
17. Mississippi College
18. Missouri State U
19. Montana State U
20. Northern Virginia Community College
21. Northwestern College

22. Oakland U
23. Oral Roberts U
24. Penn State Berks
25. Sacred Heart U
26. Southwest Minnesota State U
27. St. Ambrose U
28. St. Edwards U
29. St. John Fisher College
30. State U of New York at Cortland
31. SUNY Postdam
32. Syracuse U
33. U of Central Florida
34. U of Idaho
35. U of Minnesota Duluth
36. U of Mount Union
37. U of South Florida
38. U of Wisconsin-La Crosse
39. U of Wisconsin-Stout
40. Washington State U
41. West Chester U of Pennsylvania
42. Western Kentucky U
43. Worcester Polytechnic Institute
44. York College of Pennsylvania