

Student and Faculty Guide 2024/2025

# The Public Service Capstone

For MPA students

Making A Difference Together  
Through Public Service.





# Foreword

**Greetings and warm regards,**

**The Public Service Capstone** is the culminating experience for all students in the Master of Public Administration (MPA) program.

Listed as **PA 509**, this course affords you the opportunity to practice and grow essential career skills and engage in reflective practice while helping to build the capacity of a public, nonprofit or healthcare organization. It is a unique opportunity to let your knowledge serve the city through community partnership.

This guide addresses some of the most commonly asked questions about The Public Service Capstone requirement for the MPA program. It should answer many of your questions regarding this experience, but do not hesitate to contact me with any additional questions.

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KNOWLEDGE SERVE THE



# Overview



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## What is The Public Service Capstone?

During The Public Service Capstone, you will work on an administrative or management issue confronting a public, nonprofit or healthcare organization. It is an opportunity for you to relate your academic experience in the master's program to practice. You will conduct work that builds upon your professional experience as well as integrate and apply your academic preparation. Application and integration of course content to practice are the core elements of The Public Service Capstone.


Projects can be completed at any level of an organization. Previous students have worked with agency directors as well as frontline staff to complete a variety of projects to benefit both the organization and advance their own professional development. Each project is unique unto itself.

You should spend approximately 100 hours of work on the capstone project (approximately 80 contact hours working on the project, and 20 hours in background research and preparation of the final deliverables). **This equates to 3 credits of coursework.**

Upon completion, you will document your work for your community partner and for the University in a project report or other substantive deliverable which is negotiated with the community partner (the final deliverable(s) vary with the kind of work you take on as well as the needs and expectations your community partner). Past deliverables have included a program evaluation report, a set of standard operating procedures, a volunteer training manual, a website, and more.



## When Should I Take the Capstone?



The capstone project should take place as close to the end of your program of study for it to be truly integrative. You may take the capstone any time after you have successfully completed at least 36 graduate credits in the MPA program. This requirement helps to ensure that you have sufficient academic experience to use your capstone experience as an integrative and reflective activity.

For MPA students, PA 509 is a 3-credit course which is taken over one term.

You must have completed the [“Field of Specialization” form](#) on file with the Department after discussing it with your faculty advisor, no later than upon completion of 36 credits. Your advisor must sign the form, and the original should be given to the front office in the PA Department to place in your electronic student file. A copy of the signed Field of Specialization form must be included with your PA 509 Learning Agreement. Please contact our front office staff for help with obtaining e-signatures for this form using [publicad@pdx.edu](mailto:publicad@pdx.edu).



# Starting Your Capstone Journey



## 01 Attend a Q+A Session and Review the Materials

Check with The Public Service Capstone faculty advisor to see when capstone Q+A sessions will be offered. Typically, two sessions are offered each term. Then thoroughly review the capstone materials you receive during the Q+A session, and consult with The Public Service Capstone faculty advisor prior to starting your work.



## 02 Work with Your Faculty Advisor to Locate a Site and Project

Work with your assigned faculty advisor to find a suitable community partner and project for the capstone in light of your career goals. Then work with your faculty advisor to develop Sections 1 and 2 of the Learning Agreement (see more information below on this).



## 03 Meet with Your Community Partner and Potential Field Supervisor

Meet with your potential field supervisor at your community partner to identify and define relevant projects that will allow you to apply and integrate your coursework and draw upon the knowledge and skills you have developed through the master's program. All projects should be of substantive interest to the community partner and contribute to building the capacity of the organization.



## 04 Make Sure You Have the Skills and Knowledge to Do the Work

Make sure you have the skills required by the project(s) that your community partner has identified, through either coursework or other experience. For example, do you have the skills and knowledge to conduct a program evaluation? The faculty will not approve a project for which you do not have relevant experience.



## 05 Develop the Learning Agreement

The Learning Agreement spells out the information about you and your partner, the nature of the project, your career goals and learning objectives, skills required for the project, and final deliverables. Work first with your faculty advisor to develop Sections 1-2 and then contact The Public Service Capstone faculty advisor to complete the Learning Agreement and move forward with the project.



## 06 Get Registered and Start Your Project

Once The Public Service Capstone faculty advisor has approved your Learning Agreement, then you will be asked to submit all final materials via Google Form. Then they will submit an override in Banweb so that you can register for PA 509. The Public Service Capstone faculty advisor will notify you when the override has been completed and you can register.

# The Learning Agreement

## 01 Your Career Goals

Write up a discussion of your career goals 1-2 years from now and 5 years from now [2-3 double-spaced paragraphs].

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## 02 Your Partner, Your Project

Write up a description of the community partner (name, department/unit, field supervisor name and position. Describe the work you will be doing for your partner. [1-2 double-spaced paragraphs]

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## 03 What You Hope to Learn

Write up a list of 3 learning objectives for the project. What will you have learned or what skills/knowledge/tools will you have practiced by the end of the project?

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## 04 Course Application

Write up a list of at least 5 courses you have taken to date in your master's program from which you will apply knowledge, skills, and experiences learned to your project.

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## 05 Final Deliverables

Write up a description of the final deliverables you will turn in to The Public Service Capstone faculty at the end of the project.

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## 06 Date You Attended a Q+A

List the date of the most recent capstone Q+A session you attended.

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## 07 Unofficial Transcripts

Include your unofficial transcripts or list of courses taken in your master's program and grades for those courses as well as a schedule of remaining courses to be taken.

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## 08 Field of Specialization Form

Signed by your faculty advisor. MPA students only.

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## 09 Your Resume

Complete and current.

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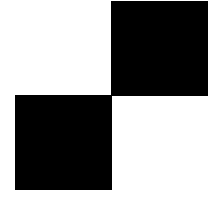
## 10 Google Form

When The Public Service Capstone advisor has approved your Learning Agreement, upload 1-9 through the Google Form link they provide to you.

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# Guidance for Developing the Learning Agreement



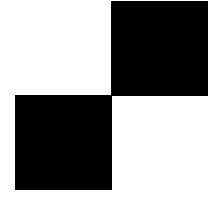
## Career Goals

Advice for writing Section 1 of the Learning Agreement, your statement on career goals.



- Should be 2-3 double-spaced paragraphs
- Career goals should be written for the short-term (1-2 years beyond graduation) plus the longer-term (5 years beyond graduation).
- Describe the kinds of positions you hope to hold, including settings, scope of work, responsibilities, and expectations. Career goals should build upon experience to date and learning in the master's program. The intent of this section of the agreement is to assist you with preparation for public, nonprofit or healthcare employment or advances in employment upon graduation.
- The [on-campus Career Center](#) is available to help with this portion of the contract.

# Guidance for Developing the Learning Agreement



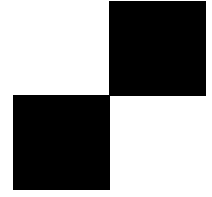
## Your Partner and Your Project

Advice for writing Section 2 of the Learning Agreement, the description of your community partner and project.



- Should be 1-2 double-spaced paragraphs
- The organizational description should include the name, as well as the department, division, and/or unit (as applicable) in which you will be working.
- In addition, provide the name, credentials (if any), and title of your field supervisor.
- Project goals should reflect two or three overarching goals for the capstone project – what you will be doing and what you will produce for the organization. Describe the specific setting, scope of work, and your responsibilities.

# Guidance for Developing the Learning Agreement



## Learning Objectives

Advice for writing Section 3 of the Learning Agreement, your learning objectives for the project.



- There should be 3 learning objectives you develop for the project plus one final learning objective (more on that soon).
- With the defined project goals you outline in your project description as a foundation, carefully consider the tasks you will need to undertake to achieve those goals. Then, develop a working outline of the knowledge, skills, and abilities you will develop as you complete those tasks. (The outline is not part of the learning contract, but is a very useful tool for developing your learning contract.)
- The 3 learning objectives describe knowledge, skills and/or competencies that you will develop or enhance in yourself through capstone project experience. The learning objectives should describe what will be different about you and your own learning experience through the capstone project and not the project goals.

# Learning Objectives: Details

## Describe

- What competencies you will have achieved when you have completed PA 509;
- What new or enhanced skills you will develop; and,
- What new knowledge you will gain, and how you will apply this knowledge in practice.

## Should

- Describe the performance of a major cognitive skill, with particular emphasis on higher-order skills such as application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation.
- Outline a specific, defined, and measurable goal.

## Include

- Three components: 1) the **learning objective statement**; 2) a **list of tasks or activities** you will engage in through the project that will help you achieve the learning objective; and, 3) a **list of evidence** you provide at the end of the project that provide the basis for evaluation of the project.

### Learning Objective Statement

Begin with an action verb that will lead to the intended outcome of product. Examples include demonstrate, apply, develop, increase, improve, practice.

### List of Tasks or Activities

What tasks and activities must be accomplished to achieve these competencies, knowledge areas, and/or skills?

### List of Evidence

How will achievement of knowledge or skills be demonstrated? How will you demonstrate concrete evidence to your field supervisor and the faculty advisor that you have attained the learning objectives?



# Learning Objectives: Examples



## EXAMPLE

### Sample Objective #1

Develop skills in grant writing

#### Tasks

- Determine organizational goals, strengths, and limitations related to the need for grant funding;
- Identify grant source(s) suitable to the organization's needs.
- Draft the grant proposal narrative.
- Develop the budget and related materials.
- Coordinate/manage internal/organizational submissions approval process.
- Finalize and submit the grant.

#### Evidence submitted

- Fully-developed grant proposal
- 



## EXAMPLE

### Sample Objective #2

Develop competencies in strategic planning

#### Tasks

- Identify relevant constituent groups;
- Collect data and conduct SWOT analysis;
- Arrange focus groups with stakeholders to discuss results of SWOT analysis;
- Draft focus group protocol, conduct focus groups, and analyze results;
- Develop draft strategic plan;
- Get feedback on draft strategic plan, and make revisions; and,
- Develop and make presentation to Board on plan.

#### Evidence submitted

- Comprehensive strategic plan; presentation materials; focus group protocol; list of constituency groups
-

# Learning Objectives:

## Final Learning Objective



Your Learning Agreement must include the three learning objectives you develop for your project PLUS the final learning objective stated below. Please include it in Section 3 of your Learning Agreement verbatim.

### Final Learning Objective

Integrate and apply what has been learned in the curriculum during the organizational experience, identify future career directions, and articulate potential ongoing professional development needs

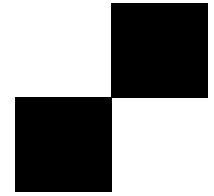
### Tasks

- Engage in reflection activities throughout the organizational experience.
- Document personal progress toward both career goals and learning objectives.
- Prepare the required reflective paper.

### Evidence submitted

- Reflective paper; online competency assessment

# Guidance for Developing the Learning Agreement



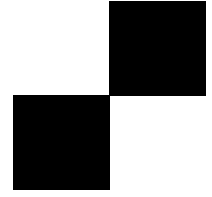
## Coursework Application

Advice for writing Section 4 of the Learning Agreement, the discussion of course application to the project.



- A project must have sufficient substance to allow you to draw upon and integrate at least **5 courses** that you have completed in your program. (In some instances, you may list a course that you are taking currently.)
- It may be useful to start with your course list and, based on course descriptions and learning objectives, identify general and specific knowledge, skills, and abilities that you will apply to complete your project.
- For each course, state the course number and name, and identify the overall goal(s) of the course. Then, identify specific, relevant concepts, knowledge, skills, and abilities, and discuss how you will apply these in your project work.
- **Example:** PAH 570 Health Administration | This course provided analytical frameworks for successful decision-making and systems analysis. One focus from the course helped us to frame strategic assessment for adding new services and/or products for healthcare organizations. This will be helpful for communication to market new products with external stakeholders and ensure success in the healthcare market.

# Guidance for Developing the Learning Agreement



## Final Deliverables

Advice for writing Section 5 of the Learning Agreement, the discussion of your final deliverables.



For this section of your Learning Agreement you need to include statements regarding **3 final deliverables** which will be submitted to The Public Service Capstone faculty advisor electronically:

- A description of the project report or substantive deliverable(s) you will submit to the organization and the University. This report or deliverable should directly reference the evidence identified in your learning objectives. More discussion of the final products is discussed below.
- A statement about the general content of the reflective essay and an acknowledgement that you will submit the essay to the University with your final deliverables.
- A statement that you are aware of and will complete the online competency self-assessment.



# Final Submissions

01

## Project Final Deliverable(s)

The first submission will be your Final Deliverable(s) that are prepared for community partner and the University and documents the work you have completed for the organization. The format and content of your final deliverable(s) is dependent upon the nature of the work completed and the needs and expectations of the organization. Students may wish to discuss the format of the final deliverable(s) with The Public Service Capstone faculty advisor. The final deliverable(s) are worth 75% of your final assessment and should receive substantial attention as you prepare them.

In some cases, the final deliverable will be a logical output of the work – for example, **a comprehensive plan** detailing the development of a strategic and/or business plan for a partner. In other cases, this may look more like **a report** in such cases a program evaluation-focused project or research study. In still other cases, where a student is engaged in process activities that are less likely to produce a report or plan, students create other tangible evidence (i.e., **a toolkit, a handbook, standard operating procedures**, etc.) that provides them with the necessary comprehensive overview and summary of work conducted and clearly summarizes the various activities in which the student has been engaged during the capstone project.

A final deliverable resembling an academic term paper is typically not sufficient for the project nor desired by the community partner.

Material that is relevant to your work should be included in or with the report or final deliverable and should be included in an appendix or separate files. Your report, plan or other final deliverable should explicitly reference each appendix or file to demonstrate the connection between the appended materials and the work being described. This material should align with your learning objectives and the list of evidence you provide there. This may include materials not submitted to the field organization but needed to satisfy the learning objectives (e.g., literature reviews, interview notes, data outputs, etc.)

Consult with The Public Service Capstone faculty advisor if you have questions prior to submitting your final materials. Only The Public Service Capstone faculty advisor will assess your materials. Where documents are considered confidential, students should make arrangements with The Public Service Capstone faculty advisor in advance, so appropriate arrangements can be made.

# Final Submissions

02

## The Reflective Essay

The second submission is a Reflective Essay (approximately 5-6 double-spaced pages) that is submitted only to the University. This should be a reflection on the value of the capstone project, addressing:

- The process and success (or not) of achieving your learning objectives,
- Description of anything else you learned (this can be something as tangible as learning a new software or as intangible as learning what kind of organizational culture is important to you),
- Ways in which you applied your coursework to the project (or not), as listed in your Learning Agreement,
- Any needs for future professional development and/or continuing education, and
- Implications of The Public Service Capstone experience for your future career.

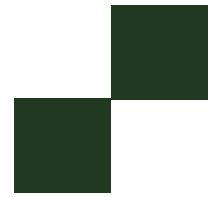
Please cover these points thoroughly and completely.

03

## Self-Assessment of Competency Attainment

The third submission is a Student Self-Assessment of Competency Attainment. Upon submission of the other materials (i.e., final deliverables and reflective paper) to The Public Service Capstone faculty advisor, you will receive an email from the PA Department, asking you to complete a self-assessment of your attainment of their program's competencies during the program. This assessment will be completed in Qualtrics, the results of which are confidential and shared only with The Public Service Capstone faculty advisor. The competency self-assessment is not graded but is a required submission.

# Frequently Asked Questions



## 01 What kind of flexibility is there in the timing of the capstone project?

Once the project and a Learning Agreement have been approved, you may begin work on your project. In some cases, this may begin mid-quarter, not registering until the next quarter although time on the project has begun. It is also common for a student to register for and begin the experience in one quarter, take an “incomplete” grade, and continue and complete the work in a subsequent quarter if more time is needed.



## 02 How do I register for PA 509?

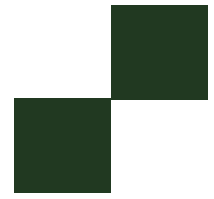
Once your Learning Agreement has been approved by The Public Service Capstone faculty advisor, they will submit an override in Banweb to allow you to register for PA 509 credits. The Public Service Capstone faculty advisor will notify you via email when they have submitted the override in Banweb to allow you to register. You cannot register for PA 509 using the typical registration process.



## 03 When are final submissions due?

Deadlines for submission of electronic copies of all final materials *generally* are: December 1 for Fall quarter completion; March 1 for Winter quarter; June 1 for Spring quarter; and, September 1 for Summer quarter. When these dates fall on a holiday or weekend, the next regular workday is the deadline for the term. Consult the table below for more information on important dates.

# Frequently Asked Questions



## 04 What do I do if my project evolves or changes?

The Public Service Capstone is meant to provide you with a “real life” experience. As in real life, sometimes priorities and needs evolve over the course of a project. If there is a substantive change that will affect learning objectives or specific tasks, you should contact The Public Service Capstone faculty advisor as soon as possible to determine the impact of the change on the overall integrity of the project.



## 05 What do I do if I’m having trouble with my partner or field supervisor?

Similarly, if there are problems with the community partner, you are encouraged to contact The Public Service Capstone faculty advisor immediately. Working closely with the field supervisor and the faculty advisor, most changes can be addressed and problems can be resolved if addressed early on. In rare instances, it may be necessary to find another, more appropriate placement.



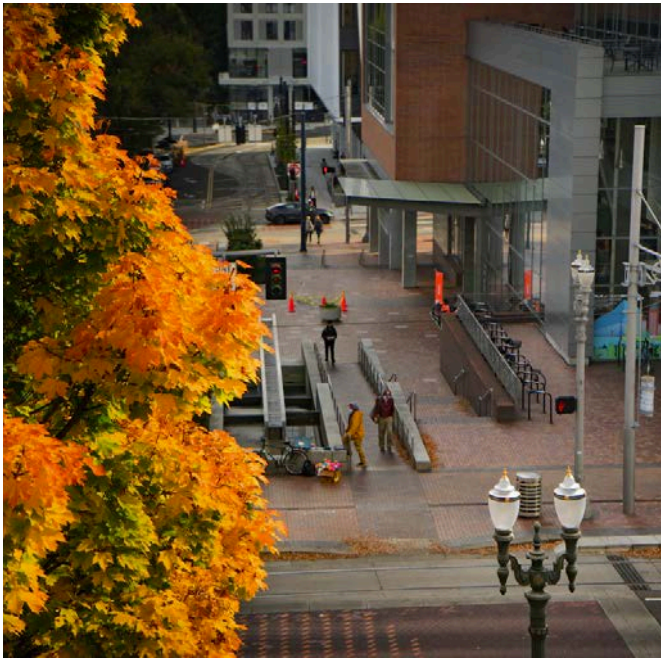
## 06 How will my project be evaluated?

The Public Service Capstone faculty advisor reviews all submissions to determine the grade. All capstone projects are graded as follows:

- Final deliverables: 75%
- Reflective essay: 25%

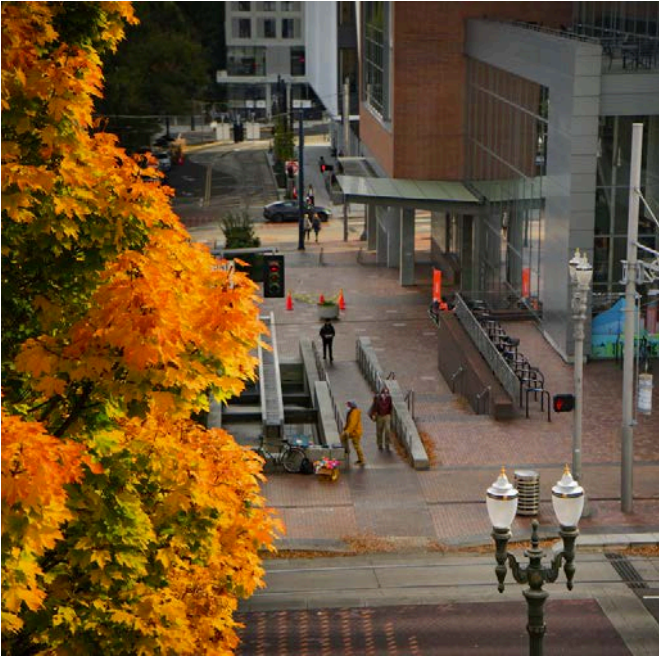
The Public Service Capstone faculty advisor will work with you if submit materials that fail to meet expectations for a passing grade.





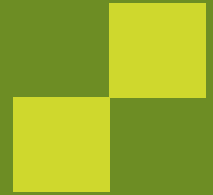
# Registration Dates + Deadlines

Registration	Fall 2024	Winter 2025	Spring 2025	Summer 2025
Submit polished draft of Sections 1-2 to your faculty advisor for review and approval	August 30	November 22	February 21	May 9
Submit draft of Sections 1-5 to the Capstone faculty advisor for review and approval	September 13	December 6	March 7	May 23
LAST date to submit full Learning Agreement via Google Form to the Capstone faculty advisor	September 27	January 3	March 21	June 6
Last date to register for PA 509	October 11	January 17	April 11	June 20



# Capstone Completion Dates

Registration	Fall 2024	Winter 2025	Spring 2025	Summer 2025
LAST date to update Learning Agreement and/or ask for an Incomplete	November 25	March 3	May 27	September 2
Final Submissions due	December 6	March 14	June 6	September 12



Making a Difference  
Together Through  
Public Service.

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