Capstone Course Portfolio Assessment: Ethics and Social Responsibility

**Purpose:** Capstone course portfolios were developed as a method to assess student learning at the Senior Capstone level of the University Studies program. In the past, we have assessed common reflection assignments, course-specific reflection assignments and Capstone final products for evidence of student learning in Capstone courses. None of these approaches was able to capture and display the complexity of student learning in a community-based group-focused course. Last year we developed course-based portfolios for Capstones which include syllabi, assignment instructions, examples of student work produced in the course, and faculty reflection.

**Method:** All Capstone instructors were invited to create course portfolios during Spring Term 2010. The group that was coordinating this project chose to focus on the University Studies ethics and social responsibility goal. Capstone instructors were offered a $250 stipend to provide the materials needed for the portfolios as well as complete a reflection about how they incorporate diversity into their courses. Nineteen course portfolios were constructed for assessment. These represent 56 sections of Capstone during the 2009-2010 academic year, which enrolled 823 students (approximately 27% of the courses and students in the Capstone program during the school year).

To assess the course portfolios a group consisting of the Capstone Director, the Assessment Coordinator and a Capstone faculty member constructed a framework for evaluating ethics and social responsibility in these course portfolios. This framework included a list of the types of learning related to diversity that occur in Capstone courses and a scoring guide that included information on scoring portfolios as inadequate, adequate, or exemplary. On the portfolio review day, four Capstone faculty members reviewed the 19 portfolios, with each portfolio being scored twice. Inter-rater reliability was 80%. In addition to an overall rating, reviewers rated each element of the portfolio as well to give the program additional information and to identify components that could be used as examples for other faculty.

Capstone Sustainability Review

**Purpose:** As Portland State University focuses increasing attention on sustainability as a practice and a learning outcome, the Capstone program decided to invite faculty to participate in documenting sustainability practices and learning in Capstone courses. Specifically, we were interested in documenting faculty definitions of sustainability, documenting current pedagogical practices used to teach students about sustainability and to explore whether and how faculty see sustainability as related to the UNST goal of ethics and social responsibility.

**Method:** Capstone instructors teaching sustainability related courses were invited to participate in by submitting course materials and reflections about sustainability in their courses. In order to understand the ways in which sustainability is represented and addressed in Capstone courses the Capstone Director and the Assessment Coordinator conducted a content analysis of the faculty reflections. Each developed a list of themes independently and then met to compare their lists, identify areas of agreement and to refine a final list of themes.

**Findings**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Portfolio Rating</th>
<th>Number of Portfolio</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Inadequate (the portfolio did not show that the course provided students with clear opportunities to demonstrate their learning related to ethics and social responsibility)</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The course portfolios demonstrated that by and large students are given opportunities to engage in and demonstrate learning related to ethics and social responsibility. Seventeen out of 19 courses were assessed as adequately meeting expectations for addressing ethics and social responsibility or as exemplary courses, incorporating many aspects of ethics and social responsibility throughout the course.

For courses that were judged to be exemplary, student work samples and faculty reflection were specifically influential. Students in these courses identified social structures and began to explore their relationships with those structures. The faculty reflection clearly discussed how the examples of assignment instructions and student work samples supported student learning related to ethics and social responsibility.

For courses that were assessed as inadequate, the materials compiled in the portfolio did not clearly reflect the type of learning opportunities that were defined. Ethics and social responsibility may have been addressed in the course, but that wasn’t evident in the portfolio. These courses tended to provide opportunities for only one type of learning related to ethics and social responsibility and did not clearly state ethics and social responsibility as a learning goal in the syllabus or provide specific assignment instructions related to ethics and social responsibility. We want to emphasize that while Capstone courses should incorporate all four UNST goals, it is difficult to focus on all of the goals equally in one course. The courses that did not provide adequate learning opportunities related to ethics and social responsibility likely focus more heavily on other UNST goals.

**Reflection on Social Responsibility Goal**

Based on the experience of reviewing Capstone portfolios during the summer of 2009, the review process was changed slightly this year. Portfolios were given a rating for each of four areas: syllabus, assignment instructions, student work, and faculty reflection. They were also given an overall holistic rating. This process allowed reviewers to provide feedback about each section of the portfolio and provides program administrators with information which can be used to identify best practices for syllabi and assignment development as well faculty pedagogical approaches. There were four reviewers for the 19 portfolios and those portfolios were reviewed on the same day as the freshman portfolios. A suggestion for next year is to bring on at least one more reviewer and to schedule the portfolio review for a different day.
Capstone Sustainability Review

After review of faculty reflections on how their courses addressed and incorporated themes of sustainability, the reviewers reached consensus on the following themes.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Definition             | • Most common: ability to endure  
                           • Brundtland Commission (U.N., 1987): meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.  
                           • Described multiple dimensions: 3 e’s = environmental, economic, equity; 3 p’s = planet, political, profit  
                           • These definitions spanned across many contexts (bio-cultural, agriculture, criminal justice system, water, local history) |
| Values/Concepts        | • Interdependence  
                           • Importance of “place-based” learning (learning on the land, learning in the garden, learning from interviews with those that are deeply connected to the land, local history…Importance of the sites!  
                           • Importance of learning being relational with peers and with land (cooperative learning practices)  
                           • Importance of service/application/real world connection  
                           • Sustainability as a Practice  
                           • Sustainability as a Process  
                           • Understanding of the past (knowing where we have come from)  
                           • Connect theory with personal practice/choices/daily living  
                           • Critique of public policy |
| Pedagogical Practices  | • Sustainability woven throughout the entire course  
                           • Value first hand (hands-on) experiences  
                           • Learning takes place in the class AND on sites  
                           • Deep value of guest speakers, local experts (mentioned in almost every course)  
                           • Experts came from a variety of backgrounds (ethnic, socioeconomic, those on the margins)  
                           • Readings from scholars/activists  
                           • Importance of class discussion  
                           • Importance of written reflection to link the theory with PERSONAL practice!  
                           • Important weekly work in the community resulting in meaningful final projects  
                           • Importance of learning about public policies that impact sustainability (lectures, written reflection, class discussions)  
                           • Some classes included research and scientific analysis as an approach to learning |
Connection with Social Responsibility

- Faculty saw it as goal of course to have students **deeply reflect on personal choices** in relationship to the course material on sustainability…Celine: quotes and examples

SURPRISE: connection with DIVERSITY

- Faculty emphasized the importance of diversity and equity when framing sustainability. All wanted to engage marginalized populations (kids, prisoners, native people, poor) in the framing of the sustainability efforts.
- Greater focus on equity and diversity than I imagined

Importance of student voice/reflection

- Many included it even though we never specifically asked for it!

**Reflection by Celine Fitzmaurice**

A review of capstone faculty essays related to Sustainability and Social Responsibility yielded key observations and recommendations for the Capstone program. The capstone website and future faculty development efforts can serve as vehicles for transmitting these lessons to the broader Capstone community.

**Defining Sustainability and Sustainability Education**

Reviewers noted that while faculty addressed the topic of sustainability through a variety of course themes, they seemed to share a common definition of sustainability. Almost all of the faculty we surveyed recognized that sustainability must be viewed through an environmental, economic and social justice lens. Faculty agreed that sustainability education is most powerful when it is place-based, collaborative, and draws on the knowledge of diverse experts (including marginalized populations.) Finally, many faculty commented that the concept of sustainability should not be relegated to privileged classes. Rather, “everyone, especially low-income members of society, can benefit from sustainable practices.”

In general, faculty looked to the Brundtland definition for sustainable development as a starting point for exploration of this theme. The Brundtland report was published in 1987 by the United Nation’s World Commission on Environmental and Development. This definition laid the groundwork for future international gatherings on sustainability and reads as follows.

“Meeting the needs of present generations without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs.” (Brundtland, 1987)

**Integrating Sustainability into the Capstone Experience**

Faculty drew on the concept of sustainability to strengthen students’ understanding of ‘social and ethical responsibility’ in a number of ways. The following quotes provide a sample of these approaches.

“Ultimately, the Natural Food Industry Capstone personalizes students’ relationship to sustainability concepts of the environment, the economy and society by focusing on something all students must do three times a day: they eat. …students must come to terms with the decisions they make around their personal food choices, increasing their awareness to the broadest implications of their role in creating a more or less sustainable future.”

“The Meditation for Global Healing Capstone gives students the opportunity to examine concepts of sustainability through the perspective and practice of Qigong. Students consider their state of being, followed by their impact on the class, their families, the community and, by the end of the term, the world they live in.”
“In this course students review the business, ecological, and social justice aspects of the Triple Bottom Line approach to business and apply their learning by working with low-income business owners.”

“We ask our students to apply the concepts of sustainability to describe reforms to the criminal justice system moving forward that would offer the best use of our shared resources for improved outcomes for individuals and communities.”

“Students are invited to explore their own heritage for its rich traditions and links to the environment through weekly reflections on readings, class discussions, deep listening and observation in nature, lecture, and guest speakers.”

**Linking Sustainability and Social and Ethical Responsibility**

Faculty members identified a natural link between the concepts of sustainability and social and ethical responsibility. Students in capstones that integrated concepts of sustainability found that they had to exercise social and ethical responsibility in their own life in order to contribute to sustainability on a global scale. In short, sustainability could only be realized if individuals acted in social and ethically responsible ways. In the words of two faculty members:

“Almost all of social responsibility is fundamental to the notion of sustainability which is based on the understanding that it is our individual and collective choices around the use of resources that determine the well-being of the communities and environment in which we live.”

“At the end of this course, it goes without saying that to make sustainable choices one must be thinking with social responsibility.”

**Applying these lessons to Capstone Faculty Development**

The reviewers learned a great deal from these faculty work samples and we are eager to share these findings with the broader Capstone community. In the future, a brown bag session could be organized to share best practices related to sustainability education in the Capstone experience. Secondly, the Capstone Website is a natural place to disseminate best practices related to the themes of sustainability education and social and ethical responsibility. We propose adding the following items to the website in order to strengthen sustainability education within the Capstone community:

1. A list of commonly used definitions for sustainability (Brundtland Commission, etc.)
2. Discipline-specific resources related to sustainability (i.e. the Natural Step Framework for Businesses)
3. Examples of ways that faculty have integrated sustainability concepts into the capstone experience (see quotations above)