Capstone: Applied Research in Policy and Politics  
CAP-GP 3148/9, 2015-16  

Syllabus  
Mondays 6:45-8:25pm  
WAVE Room 669  

Professor  
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COURSE SUMMARY  

Capstone is learning in action. In architecture, the capstone is the crowning piece of an arch, the center stone that holds the arch together, giving it shape and strength. Part of Wagner’s core curriculum, the Capstone program plays a similar role by building on students’ previous coursework and expertise, while also enhancing student learning on policy and management issues, key process skills and research skills. Capstone requires students to interweave their learning in all these areas, and to do so in real time, in an unpredictable, complex real world environment.  

For those of you who have chosen the Applied Research track, the course will synthesize your skills in policy analysis and empirical methods in an integrative project that answers an important policy question. Over the year, you will work in teams to develop a research question, identify and analyze existing data to test your arguments, and present your findings in both oral and written form. The course has dual objectives. One is to sharpen your skills as a rigorous consumer and producer of policy knowledge. The other is to learn how to work effectively and efficiently in a team environment, in which most policy research is conducted.  

LEARNING OBJECTIVES  

Capstone integrates and enhances learning in several arenas: a content or issue area, process skills including a project, team management, and research methods for gathering, analyzing and reporting data. The specific learning objectives are:  

CONTENT  
Students should:  
• understand the policy context for their project;
• be familiar with specialized vocabularies required to perform the project successfully;
• be aware of critical research related to their content area;
• be capable of positioning and evaluating their project within its broader policy context.

PROCESS
Overall, students should demonstrate a capacity for flexibility and resilience, as shown by adapting to changing and complex circumstances, balancing competing demands and accepting uncertainty and lack of clarity when necessary.

1. Project Management
Students should demonstrate the ability to:
• frame and refine the research question;
• develop a research work plan with timelines and deliverables;
• monitor their progress against the work plan;
• revise the work plan as necessary.

2. Team Management
Students should demonstrate the ability to:
• understand group formation and development;
• understand the importance of interpersonal dynamics and team norms;
• periodically review their team charter;
• develop clear role descriptions for team members;
• manage team assignments and accountability;
• advocate points of view and negotiate differences of opinion;
• solicit and offer feedback;
• appreciate and learn from cultural differences.

RESEARCH
Students should demonstrate the ability to:
• identify appropriate quantitative and/or qualitative data analysis methods for their particular project;
• situate their findings in the broader related literature;
• draw conclusions based on their findings;
• effectively communicate their work both orally and in writing.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS
The full class will not meet every week, but you should always have the Monday 6:45-8:25pm slot open for meetings with me or your teams.

The following list of deliverables will help you and your team pace progress and hold each other accountable. The written portion of each task is always due to me by 5pm on the Friday BEFORE the oral presentation. Oral presentations should use PowerPoint or a similar program.
Fall Semester Deliverables

Project Idea
A short team presentation (5-10 minutes) that covers the following:
- Your area of interest
- 2-4 researchable and policy-relevant questions that you may tackle
  Research questions typically take the form of “Does X influence Y and why?”
- Possible data sources for each question
- Weaknesses/potential challenges you expect

A short memo (1-2 pages) summarizing above points, written as a team.

Project Prospectus
A full presentation (20-30 minutes) as a team that covers the following:
- Your chosen research question
- Context: How your question fits into the broader policy debate/history in your area
- Research design: How will you test your hypothesis? What cases are you focusing on? What methodologies (cross-sectional analysis, panel, regression discontinuity, matching, diff-in-diff) do you plan to use to demonstrate causality?
- Data/measures:
  o What data set will you use? Describe its nature and why it is a good fit for your project.
  o How are you going to operationalize your independent/dependent variables?
- Analysis plan: Walk us through the analytical steps you will take to test your hypothesis
- Identification of potential weaknesses, either administrative (data or team-related concerns) or analytical (threats to causality or the argument).

A prospectus memo (3-5 pages), written as a team.

Team Charter/Work Plan
Brief outline (2 pages)
- Team Charter portion
  o Identify team members who will take primary responsibility for: literature review, data cleaning and preliminary analysis, detailed analysis, tables and figures, drafting of each section. As a team, you should discuss each of your strengths and skill sets and reach a consensus on the way responsibilities are allocated.
  o Outline specific strategies for communication
  o Outline strategies for conflict resolution
- Work Plan portion: Include a general timeline for task completion.

Progress Report
A presentation (15-20 minutes) on team progress
- Brief recap of your research question/project
- Summarize progress in each area/step
- Initial analysis: This can include an overview of the variables in your data set, some preliminary cross-tabs or bivariate graphs on your hypothesis
• Overview of challenges so far: Anything from team collaboration, analysis, to administrative concerns is valid.

A progress memo (3-5 pages) of the initial results.

**Spring Semester Deliverables**

**Interim Report**
A presentation (15-20 minutes) on the project’s progress
• Project context, question, conceptual framework, research design, data, and methods:
  You should treat this as practice for the Final Report presentation
• Presentation of intermediate results in tables and graphs
• Robustness checks for results or plans

Interim Report (5-10 pages). This should be written in a way that can serve as the bare bones outline for the Final Report, with literature review, bibliography, and main results.

**Final Report**
A professional presentation (20-30 minutes) of the Final Report
• Treat this as practice for your participation in the Capstone Expo

Final Report Due.

**EVALUATION and GRADING**

Students will receive 1.5 credits for the fall semester and 1.5 for the spring semester. At the end of the first semester, students will receive a grade of “IP” (Incomplete Pass) to reflect the “work in progress” nature of the year long project. I will assign final grades at the end of the second semester.

Grades will be allotted to individuals, not to the team as a whole. That is, team members may receive different grades. I will make this judgment based both on my assessment of students’ contribution and learning and on the assessments you give each other as part of the evaluation process at the end of the first and second semesters.

Grade Breakdown:

60% Works products/Interim deliverables
  ▪ Quality and rigor of presentations and written memos/reports
  ▪ Late submissions will be deducted

40% Evidence of learning as outlined in the Learning Objectives
  ▪ Quality of student’s participation in the team, based on end of semester faculty, peer, and self evaluations
  ▪ Ability to constructively act on peer/faculty feedback
COURSE SCHEDULE

Twice in the year, during regular course hours, we require all students to attend a Capstone skills training session instead of class. These dates are:

1) October 26, 2015: Capstone Advanced Team Session
   Kimmel Center for Student Life, Room TBA
2) February 29, 2016: Presentation Skills Training
   Kimmel Center for Student Life, Eisner & Lubin Auditorium (4th flr)

Capstone Expo will be on May 10th, 5-6:30pm.

Fall Semester

September 14  Overview of course and introductions. Interest/skills questionnaire.

September 21  Team Formation. Discussion of what makes a good research project.
   Required Reading: “What is Research Design?”
   Statistical Analysis of Government Responses to HIV/AIDS.” Comparative
   Political Studies 40(12): 1407-1432.

September 28  Practical steps for applied research I
   Lecture notes will be posted before weekend; please print and bring for notes.

October 5    Practical steps for applied research II
   Lecture notes will be posted before weekend; please print and bring for notes.

October 13   Project Idea Presentations
   (Tuesday)

October 19   Workshop: Feedback, finalize research question

October 26   Mandatory Capstone Advanced Team Session

November 2   Project Prospectus Presentations

November 9   Workshop: Discuss Team Charter/Work Plan and Prospectus feedback

November 16  No class

November 23  No class

November 30  Workshop: Discuss ongoing issues, preparation for Progress Report

December 14  No class

**Spring Semester**

January 25  Workshop: Discuss evaluations, feedback on progress
February 1  No class
February 8  No class
February 15  No class, President’s Day University Holiday
February 22  Workshop: Preparation for Interim Report Presentation
February 29  Mandatory Capstone Presentation Skills Training
March 7  **Interim Report Presentations**
March 14  Spring Recess
March 21  No class
March 28  No class
April 4  Workshop: On a “if needed” basis, feedback on progress
April 11  No class
April 18  No class
April 25  Workshop: Preparation for Final Report presentation
May 2  **Final Report Presentations**, End of semester evaluations
May 10 (Tuesday)  **Capstone Expo**
RESOURCES

Wagner has a new research librarian, Andrew Battista, who can support you in research methods, literature reviews, and data visualization. His main office is at Bobst, but he will also hold office hours at Wagner every other Thursday, 4:30-6:30pm, at the Puck Building, Office 3045 on the third floor.

Students who need help with data management, data analysis (Stata, SPSS, R), or GIS mapping should contact the NYU Data Service Studio located on the 6th floor of the Bobst Library. Consultation is available via email (data.service@nyu.edu), phone (212-998-3434), or on a walk-in basis. Also see the following website (http://guides.nyu.edu/wagner) that Andrew put together for a list of resources and materials that will be helpful to you.