



The Martin School initiated a capstone course in 1996 to better reflect the skills and knowledge we expect our students to develop than was the case with the traditional comprehensive exam. A central feature of the course is development of an individual capstone project. Students apply competencies acquired in the MPA program to a practical management problem or policy issue confronted in a practice setting. Typical problems arise from internship or work settings. The project leads to an analytically grounded set of recommendations for addressing the problem or issue.

Martin capstone projects draw on the strong analytical training students acquire in the program. Most, but not all, involve the application of quantitative skills. The range of topics is quite diverse. In 2014, for example, students analyzed Louisville's LouieStat program, the effect of governance characteristics on public retirement systems, the health condition of workers in the thoroughbred industry, the costs and effectiveness of a pharmacy intern program, the effect of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act on a Ryan White funded HIV clinic, the success of a Salvadoran program to prevent underage drinking, management factors that affect the success of electronic tolling systems, social media fund raising for non-profit organizations, spending for affordable housing in Lexington and other cities, and the socioeconomic impact of coal in the Appalachian region of Kentucky, among other topics.

One faculty member serves as instructor for the class, but each student seeks out a member of the faculty to serve as primary advisor for the project. Thus, the student receives feedback from two faculty members (and potentially others) as the project develops. They also receive feedback from a team of peers. Milestones and rapid feedback help keep projects on track.

All students present their project at a capstone forum held a week before the end of spring semester. A panel of three faculty members and a practitioner questions the students before an audience of students, faculty, and practitioners. This event serves as the student's final exam and is a showcase for the capabilities of our students and a learning experience for first year students.

Faculty and practitioners use a formal assessment form to evaluate the capstone projects. The form reflects the competencies we expect our students to demonstrate in their project. Each panel member completes the evaluation, which is shared with the student. In addition to the project assessments, the

capstone course incorporates two other evaluation processes. In the last class session, students complete a SWOT analysis of the program, identifying the strengths and weaknesses of the program, what they got the most out of, what provided the least benefit, and what we can do to improve the program. They also complete a post-program self-assessment of the extent to which they possess our core competencies. We match that with an identical pre-program self-assessment.

To inform programmatic decision making, we review the project assessments, SWOT analysis, and competency self-assessments at our annual retreat. Over the years, we have used insights obtained from this information to modify our program in a variety of ways, particularly the structure and content of courses and preparation for the capstone project itself. For example, we have eliminated a course and modified the content of other courses. And we now start the process of getting the students thinking about their projects in the fall, instead of waiting until the spring semester.

The capstone course is highly successful as an educational process and an assessment instrument. It is instrumental in leading to program improvements. It gives students a product they can share with potential employers. Indeed, some students have ended up with jobs as a result of their capstone presentations. Organizations have found the analyses useful for their own decision making. NASPAA, SECOPA, and ABFM have recognized the work of many of the students with best paper awards.