

CAPSTONE REFLECTIONS

Below you will find reflections from current and former doctoral students in the Educational Leadership and Policy Studies Department regarding the Capstone Project. If you have any questions regarding the summary, contact Hannah Clayborne, hannah@iastate.edu

Please describe your process of selecting a topic and site for your Capstone project. What factors did you consider most important in making your final selections?

I worked with my major professor to identify potential ideas for my capstone project. He encouraged me to meet with students currently working on their experiences for ideas and suggestions. I knew I wanted to gain experience at a small private institution and I had contacts at Grand View College that I contacted to identify potential ideas. I was fortunate to find a project that was related to my interests and professional goals.

(Kari Hensen, Higher Education)

I picked my site out of convenience. I decided to go back to my alma mater because I knew several of the individuals there and felt that I could have access to the participants and data I needed. In addition, I was interested in doing research at a small, private school since all of my professional work and doctoral works was done at a large, public university. The topic that I selected was a collaborative effort among my mentor/client, my POS committee and myself. I was personally interested in studying retention and the institution that I chose as my site was also struggling with issues related to retention. However, since "retention" is such a broad topic, had to try and narrow this scope to make it a more manageable project. The most important factors were those of practicality: Could I have access to the people and data that I needed to do a complete study? How much was this going to cost? NOTE: At the time of my capstone there were no funds available to help students complete a capstone. There are funds available for dissertations but NOT capstones. How much time would I need to spend on-site? My site was 3 hours away and I was also working and taking two classes. I needed to be able to gather data in a relatively short amount of time.

(Ann Gansemer-Topf, Higher Education)

Did you encounter any surprises or unanticipated problems (e.g., regarding Capstone proposal, budgetary matters or sources, timeline, data collection) while completing the Capstone project? If so, what was helpful to you in dealing with them?

The Capstone took longer to complete than I had anticipated because of many factors outside my control. The institution I was working with was undergoing many changes and so my initial client changed and project evolved too. I had to postpone my initial proposal meeting with my committee and the final project turned out much differently than my initial proposal because of these factors. Thankfully, the committee seemed to anticipate this and was very flexible. In dealing with these issues, I kept in close contact with my major professor and we made the appropriate changes.

(Kari Hensen, Higher Education)

Of course - like all projects there were some unanticipated problems. 1. The first difficulty was striking an agreement between what my mentor and client had wanted me to do and what my committee thought would be best. I didn't anticipate negotiating between these two groups. I was a consultant and student at the same time and needed to find a way to meet the requests of both groups. (A piece of advice: If a student and his/her major professor thinks this may be a concern, I would advise that the mentor be present either in person or by phone during the capstone proposal meeting.) I originally had planned to

do my capstone project in Fall, 2003 but my client was interested in getting the data collected in Spring, 2003. As a result, I needed to put together a proposal and set up a capstone proposal meeting very quickly. Needless to say - my proposal wasn't as strong as it should have been and my proposal meeting was not a pleasant experience. Would I have done it differently? I'm not sure - I was very interested in the topic and I had already invested time in the project. Although I was rushed, I dreaded the thought of starting over again finding a new site or a new topic.

(Ann Gansemer-Topf, Higher Education)

For my project I conducted several focus groups. I had staff at my site institution organize the focus groups. Some focus groups were well attended but some were not. There was a miscommunication in date and time and no one showed up for one focus group. As a result, we needed to reschedule the focus group and alter my site visit schedule. Because of the lack of participation for some groups, I was concerned about the trustworthiness of my results. However, since there was little I could do I analyzed the data the best I could.

(Ann Gansemer-Topf, Higher Education)

I initially thought my capstone would be a semester-long project. However, the entire process - from my first initial contact to my final capstone defense - took 15 months. What helped me? I kept in contact with my major professor to inform him of my problems and difficulties. This was especially helpful when it came time to have my capstone review with my committee. There were others in my cohort also involved in capstone projects who were experiencing some frustrations but also had successes. It helped to discuss these with my peers.

(Ann Gansemer-Topf, Higher Education)

Were you involved in other professional commitments (e.g., work, classes) while completing your Capstone project? If so, what impacts, if any, did these have on your capstone experience?

I worked full-time, gave birth to my first child and tried to have a "life" outside of coursework. I took the baby to meet with the client several times and just keep focused on my timeline to ensure I continued to make progress on my project.

(Kari Hensen, Higher Education)

At the time of my capstone proposal and site visit, I was taking two other classes, working thirty hours a week, volunteering at my kids' day care and school, and trying to do at least a satisfactory job of being a wife and mother. I was tired. During the summer when I was not involved in as many classes and work slowed down, so I used that time to analyze data.

(Ann Gansemer-Topf, Higher Education)

What would be your recommendations for current and prospective ELPS doctoral students on how to successfully complete the Capstone project?

Start early to identify potential projects and sites. Meet with students who have completed the capstone for advice on the process and experience. Talk regularly with your major professor and call on him/her for professional advice when needed. Identify a realistic timeline taking into consideration things outside of your control (institutional factors, timelines, etc.). What will you do if no one comes to your focus group? What is your back-up plan? Have one!

(Kari Hensen, Higher Education)

Interestingly, some of the recommendations for completing the capstone project are somewhat similar to completing the dissertation. Focus, focus, focus. We all want to do a grand, earth-shattering project but

doing a smaller, less complicated project very well is better than doing a mediocre more complex project AND it will be less stressful.

(Ann Gansemer-Topf, Higher Education)

Don't burn out or drag it out too long - you still have a dissertation to write.

(Ann Gansemer-Topf, Higher Education)

Most committee members have an understanding of what a dissertation is, what it looks like, the format, etc. At the time I completed my capstone, the guidelines for doing a capstone were less clear. This can be positive or negative so talk with your major professor in depth before proposing and writing the final report. Have an understanding of what the final product of the capstone will be before you collect and analyze the data.

(Ann Gansemer-Topf, Higher Education)

Keep in touch with your mentor. Prior to your capstone let them know what is expected of him/her. Before the final capstone review with your committee - prep your mentor/client as to what to expect. Although you can never be sure what is going to happen, let your mentor know who is on the committee, the purpose of the meeting, and what questions the mentor may be expected to answer.

(Ann Gansemer-Topf, Higher Education)