CAPSTONES AT PLU: A Summary
May 2011

Introduction/Rationale
The General Education Council has interest in understanding the capstone experience at PLU:
How do different disciplines approach a capstone experience? What are common aspects of the
capstone experience at PLU? What can we learn from each other across disciplines?
In Fall 2010, the council asked Deans and Department Chairs across the university to submit
syllabi, rubrics, and other background information around the capstone experiences. Council
members reviewed the documents, and provide the following synthesis of their understanding of
the capstone experience at PLU.

Definitions/Principles of Capstones
At PLU, a capstone experience is generally defined as part of the General Education curriculum
as well as the academic major:
> **Producing and Presenting Culminating Scholarship: Senior Seminar/Project**:
> A substantial project, paper, practicum, or internship that culminates and advances the
> program of an academic major. The end product must be presented to an open audience
> and critically evaluated by faculty in the student's field. These credits count in the major.

These experiences are generally
- grounded in theories and principles of a particular discipline
- representative of the higher level of writing skills expected as a professional
- reflective of higher level thinking and integrative learning
- demonstrating significant program level learning outcomes
- preparing students for post-degree roles and expectations
- engaging students in the intentional reflection on and use of their prior learning
- providing evidence of learning for both improvement and accountability

Models for Capstones
- Capstones that pull together learning in the major
- Capstones that satisfy a discipline-specific or professional standard
- Capstones that are inter- or multi-disciplinary in nature

Common Options for Capstone Experiences
- Thesis or research paper
- Design or demonstration projects
- Experiment or scientific study
- Portfolio development
- Case studies or selected readings related to the discipline
- Internship or field based practicum experiences

Keys to a Successful Capstone Experience
- The systematic review of student capstone work by faculty and presentation of the data
  as an element of program review.
- Particular goals of the major are reflected in the type of product, or the focus of the
  experience. For example, anthropology (grant proposal model), education (student
  teaching portfolio on student work to document success), nursing (clinicals, final
  product).

- The creation of a consistent faculty audience through common presentation schedules and the evolving of a culture of faculty participation and commitment to the capstone experience.
- The creation of a consistent student audience by creating a culture of student participation (e.g., inviting all declared majors and minors to attend presentations).
- Flexibility of using faculty as mentors. The instructor carries the major responsibility for the content of the capstone course, but students use faculty with particular expertise to expand the products.
- The primary focus of capstone experiences should be on the synthesis, integration, and/or application of knowledge that builds upon a foundation of prior knowledge and skills gained throughout the curriculum.
- Students are engaged in intentional reflection as part of the capstone experience.
- Capstones should be structured near the end of the program of study.
- Satisfactory completion of capstones should be required for graduation.
- Preliminary conversations with both students and faculty about the capstones tends to promote further understanding of capstone requirements and expectations.

Structural Considerations
- Capstones are consistently accounted for in faculty load.
- Capstone credit totals 4 credits.
- Some departments have a pre-requisite methodology course (300 level).
- Some departments require a two term capstone experience.

Emerging Questions
- What is the relationship of the capstone experience to General Education and the ILOs?
- How do PLU capstones consistently reflect high impact educational practices (from AAC&U)?
- What are ways to support faculty development in teaching and mentoring student during the capstone process?
- Do we have consistent and appropriate pre-requisite experiences required for the capstone experience?
- Do we have consistent and appropriate assessment tools and models in place for documenting the success of capstones at PLU?
- How can we encourage conversations around capstones both within departments and divisions as well as across campus.

Next Steps
- How can the General Education Council support the documentation of capstone experiences?
- What is the feasibility of broadening the publication of capstones?
- What are ways we can provide adequate general support for capstone experiences?
- What are ways to incorporate capstone assessment into broader program review?
- Do we need a common language around overarching capstone outcomes to guide more specific discipline-based outcomes?

References
AAC&U. (2011). An overview of high impact practices. http://www.aacu.org/leap/hip.cfm

Hundley, S.P, (2011). Critical questions for designing, improving, and supporting capstone experiences. See original document at http://manoa.hawaii.edu/assessment/howto/capstone.htm