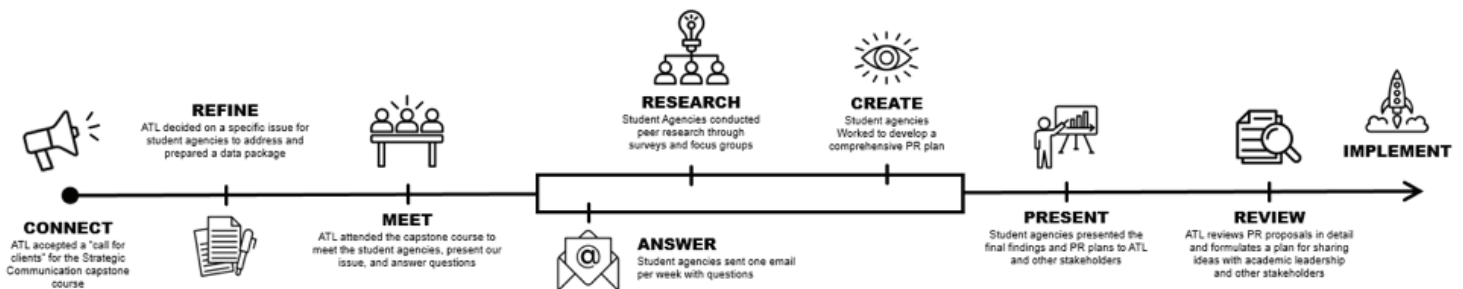# Assessment in Practice

Students Bring a Fresh Perspective to Institutional Assessments through Capstone Projects in Strategic Communication

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CONTEXT: UNIVERSITY FOCUS ON CAPSTONE EXPERIENCES

As part of its 2012 revision of general education, Washington State University (WSU), a research-intensive university with six campuses, added a capstone course requirement for all undergraduates. Capstones are a well-known high-impact practice, offering "opportunities to integrate, synthesize, and apply knowledge [which] are essential to ensuring deep, meaningful learning experiences" (Kinzie, 2013, p. 27).

In 2016, WSU's Office of Assessment of Teaching and Learning (ATL) partnered with NILOA to offer faculty development for capstone assignment design. First, a workshop with Dr. Pat Hutchings focused on applying Lee and Loton's (2015) capstone principles to culminating assignments, designed to ensure that students are provided opportunities to extend prior learning and make connections in authentic,

challenging, and complex settings. Then, faculty participated in NILOA-style charrettes, which grouped together instructors from different disciplines who were designing similar kinds of capstone projects, in order to exchange ideas about ways to strengthen their assignments. From these charrettes, ATL learned that many WSU capstones for majors feature students working with industry or community partners, engaging as *active agents with real professional tasks to produce authentic artifacts*—such as recommendations, solutions, or models—but that faculty sometimes struggle to find enough good partners and authentic projects.

ATL PARTNERS WITH STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION CAPSTONE COURSE

As assessment practitioners know, conducting assessment involves communicating effectively with faculty, students, and administration at various levels of the institution, and collecting data often presents challenges. It can, for example, be challenging to get high response rates on university-wide student surveys, which can provide valuable insight into student experience, perceptions, and motivations. Our office, along with other university units, helps promote two such assessments: the biennially-administered National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) and course evaluations collected each semester. Following the capstone charrettes, we approached the Murrow College of Communication, to see if developing promotion plans for these two assessments could provide professionally-focused capstone experiences for their majors and give us strategies to share with our assessment stakeholders.

In Strategic Communication's undergraduate program, projects with real-world clients form the core of the capstone semester (see ComStrat 485 Course Description, Appendix A). The students form "agencies" comprising teams of 5-6 students that function like real-world public relations firms, conducting research into an issue and developing a strategy to address it—usually, but not always, in the form of a PR campaign. College leadership welcomed both projects we proposed, connecting us with the capstone instructor in Fall 2016 for NSSE and in Spring 2018 for course evaluations. In essence, our office officially became a capstone client.

WHY INVOLVE STUDENTS IN ASSESSMENT?

Through this project, we saw the opportunity to engage students in understanding and communicating the value of these institution-wide assessments, and to learn more about students' motivations and barriers to participation. Our office wanted to gain student insights and strategies to help the university message the value of these assessments and increase response rates. In particular, we hoped that capstone agency research—especially its student-conducted focus groups and surveys—would yield more candid student responses than professional staff could collect, perhaps leading to fresh insights and more effective local PR strategies.

As Cook-Sather, Bovill, and Felten (2014) note, the student "experience and expertise typically is in being a student—something that many faculty [or staff] have not been for many years; they understand where they and their peers are

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coming from and, often, where they think they are going" (p. 15). This sentiment was echoed in a post-project interview with one of the agency members.

2016 PROJECT: PROMOTING NSSE

In our first partnership, ComStrat capstone agencies focused on developing strategies to improve messaging and response rates for NSSE. Early in the semester, the instructor invited us to a "Meet the Client," class session, where we asked agencies to look into these assessment-related questions: *How can we communicate the importance of university-wide surveys? What would motivate first year students and seniors to respond to NSSE?* With WSU implementing NSSE plug-ins for the first time, we also requested promotional strategies using the LMS and student portal.

The agencies did background research on NSSE, and conducted surveys, focus groups, and interviews with fellow students. We established a protocol for agencies to contact us weekly via email with their ongoing questions.

At the end of the semester, students presented 15-minute summaries of their research and campaign recommendations, including highlights from their surveys, focus groups, and interviews. As the client, our office attended all presentations, which the instructor recognized as adding value to the student experience. All five agencies gave us substantial PR campaign plans, with sample promotions.

2018 PROJECT: PROMOTING COURSE EVALUATIONS

For our second project, we asked ComStrat 485 agencies to focus on this question: *How can WSU improve both the participation rate and quality of student course evaluation responses?* Again, the agencies conducted background research through student surveys, focus groups and interviews, and investigated course evaluation forms and products. During the semester, most agencies queried us about aspects of WSU's course evaluation policies and practices. At the end of the term, eight agencies produced a wide-ranging group of strategies and presented their findings and recommendations to our staff.

APPLICATION

In December 2016, our staff immediately shared specific agency suggestions with the university team planning promotion for the spring 2017 NSSE. In particular, agencies recommended increasing WSU branding on promotional images and asking instructors to message in classes about NSSE's value. Using these and other new strategies, WSU raised response rates by 10% among first-year students. Longer term, we reviewed transcripts from the student focus groups where comments further illuminated perceptions about participating in university assessment activities. We were able to take this information into account as our office refined NSSE messaging for the 2019 cycle.

Regarding promotion of course evaluations, we have reviewed the final agency reports and compiled a list of promising actionable items. These have been shared with university and college leadership, to help them shape strategies and promotion to bolster response rates.

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AUTHENTIC CAPSTONE EXPERIENCES BENEFIT STUDENTS

Opportunity to integrate learning and apply in authentic context. The course design and professional tasks for these team capstone projects gave students meaningful opportunities to make connections that help integrate learning. Through activities outside-the-classroom, students encountered and integrated diverse perspectives; their project connected course content with an applied context, and required students to repeatedly connect their disciplinary knowledge and coursework with real world tasks—the kinds of activities that Kinzie (2013) characterizes as critical for integrative experiential learning.

Post-project discussions with students revealed that they greatly valued the authentic tasks and applications. "I treated this as a real project," said one student. "It had a sense of urgency, unlike mock situations I had experienced in other classes."

Portfolio deliverables. With an authentic client and project, students completing this capstone have experience and samples to enhance their portfolio and resumé for an entry level position in the communications sector. Working in teams, successful students conducted research, analyzed quantitative and qualitative data, formally presented their findings and recommendations to a client, and contributed positively to a team. Afterwards, another student reflected positively on this capstone, stating that this was "The first time that I really got to use my skills and do a hands-on project. Now I have lots of confidence in what I can do."

REFLECTIONS, LIMITATIONS, AND FUTURE OPPORTUNITIES

Because of their unique positioning and perspective, the student agencies' final reports provided fresh insights into what motivates students to contribute to institutional assessment activities, and what disincentivizes participation. Many recommendations corresponded to established research findings and good practices, such as the value of instructors expressing interest in course evaluation results, or the fact that busy students may prioritize responding to course evaluations based on positive/negative experiences in a given course.

Students also provided a wealth of new outreach strategies. Fresh promotional ideas ranged from faculty testimonial videos, to opportunities to partner with student organizations, to assessment-themed geofilters for social media.

We do, however, recognize limitations to the recommendations students made about promoting both assessments. Each semester, agency questions revealed a limited knowledge of our university's complex administrative structures, policies, and processes. Notably, the array of faculty, chairs, associate deans and deans—who at various levels and in various ways use results from course evaluations or NSSE—was largely unknown to the students and so could not inform their thinking or messaging. Similarly, and understandably, the suggested PR campaigns could not take into account communicating in a large, decentralized university environment, across 12 colleges and 6 campuses.

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We realize, too, that most capstone seniors are relative novices, pre-professionals applying skills independently and sometimes for the first time in a messy, authentic context. For example, while some data collected by the agencies yielded useful insights, the sample of survey responses was generally small, and some surveys and focus groups were susceptible to convenience sampling bias (e.g., all collected in one college). Again, this limitation is understandable for projects developed, conducted and analyzed in just 15 weeks, and done by students in advance of professional experience and without administrative infrastructure used in industry.

We encourage other institutions to consider leveraging capstone teams that can engage students with assessment.

Despite these limitations, we are looking for other opportunities to work with senior culminating projects, as win-win authentic partnerships. We encourage other institutions to consider leveraging capstone teams that can engage students with assessment.

REFERENCES/FURTHER READING

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APPENDIX A

COMSTRAT 485: Public Relations Management and Campaign Design
The Edward R. Murrow College of Communication, Washington State University

COURSE DESCRIPTION (Cara Salazar, Spring 2018)
This course is a capstone course that introduces students to the process of **campaign development, management, and evaluation**, and marks the transition from student to professional. The primary objective of this course is to help you master the elements of a strategic communication campaign through direct experience as a practitioner. The course is designed from a professional perspective and makes use of extensive real-life examples. **You will be working with a real-world client**, which implies I expect you to conduct yourself like professionals in your interaction with me, your teammates, and your client. This also means that you will be evaluated on the quality, creativity, and professionalism of your work product.

Working in teams, you will develop a robust, measurable, and actionable strategic communication plan for a client assigned to you by the instructor. Your team will identify and research the client's real PR problem, and then develop a campaign to address the issue. **This course requires at least 5 - 7 hours of outside class work each week.**

This is an exciting opportunity to apply your public relations skills and knowledge that you have acquired through your coursework (research methods, writing, strategy, visual communications, and industry-specific trends), as well as your practical and professional experience during internships or jobs.
While you will be working in teams, this course will provide you with a platform to showcase your individual creative talents and knowledge of communication programs, strategies, trends, and tactics. Emphasis in the course is on the development of various campaign components, with emphasis on the preparation of a campaign proposal. Other important aspects of the course include team participation, presentation skills, problem solving, and critical thinking.

Successful completion of this course will allow students to add the campaign proposal to their portfolio and present it to prospective employers.

Student Learning Outcomes
- Demonstrate knowledge of communication concepts. Students read academic and professional publications; and apply concepts from the text to specific research questions from a client.
- Acquire and analyze information. Students collect information to critically assess a range of public relations campaign components; and collect and analyze data.
- Create communication products via multiple platforms. Students use public relations concepts to develop a communication plan through a variety of platforms; and identify PR communication plan objectives and outline communication protocols.

Please Cite As:

About NILOA

- The National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA) was established in December 2008, and is co-located at the University of Illinois and Indiana University.
- The NILOA website contains free assessment resources and can be found at http://www.learningoutcomesassessment.org.
- The NILOA research team has scanned institutional websites, surveyed chief academic officers, and commissioned a series of occasional papers.

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