PORTLAND STATE UNIVERSITY

As part of a required capstone course, students work in teams to address a problem or issue affecting the local community.

"My appreciation for the diversity of human experience comes from my experience in the community—and from [my peers'] experience, too," says Seanna Kerrigan, director of the capstone program at Portland State University (PSU). "Together we make meaning and unpack the complexities involved in systems of interlocking oppression and examine issues of power and privilege."

That's why capstones at PSU are not individual projects that individual students carry out in isolation; rather, they are completed as part of a required capstone course. Within each course, students work on capstone projects in interdisciplinary teams, under the guidance of a faculty member and a liaison from a local community organization, to address a problem or issue affecting that community.

All PSU seniors complete capstones—more than four thousand students each year. PSU's capstones focus on applying students' cumulative learning to real-world problems of their choosing—perhaps the key element of signature work. "[The capstone course] is a reminder to students that while their education is a personal journey and they have their own personal goals, ultimately we're going to have to work together," says Judy Bluehorse Skelton, a senior instructor at PSU.

HISTORY AND STRUCTURE

PSU students have been engaging in community-based capstones for twenty years now. Capstones became a requirement under Judith Ramaley's tenure as president of the university in the early nineties. As she wrote in the *Journal of Urban Affairs* in 1996, Ramaley saw the urban university as a "distinctive institutional type," defined not just by its location but by "the nature and extent of its responsiveness to the research and educational needs of complex metropolitan regions." The community-based capstone, Kerrigan says, "fit with her idea of 'let knowledge serve the city.'"

The capstone is part of the college-wide general education program, which extends across four years of study. The first year of general education at PSU follows an inquiry-based model, with a series of interdisciplinary courses, each taught by a team of faculty members and a peer mentor. About 85 percent of students do a community-based learning project during their first year.

In the second year, students complete another series of "inquiry classes"—interactive, theme- based seminars—again with corresponding peer mentor sessions in which students engage in further discussion with their colleagues. Each of these courses, and the others throughout the general education program, addresses four key learning outcomes: communication, critical thinking, appreciation of human diversity, and social responsibility.

The intent is for these early general education *courses* to lay the foundation for students' major coursework and, eventually, their senior capstones, Kerrigan says. But because most students who will graduate from PSU transfer from other institutions, most don't take the full general education sequence.

Portland Community College (PCC) is the largest source of transfers, so PSU faculty have worked with colleagues at PCC to try to align the curriculum between the two institutions to enhance student learning. However, many other institutions also send students to PSU. PSU had a transfer transition course in the past to assist students with making meaning of the pathways. This course was

discontinued for a variety of reasons. Recently, a group of faculty and administrators has started to design a new potential transfer transition course that will better meet the needs of transfer students and set them up to be successful in engaging in pathways or "clusters" as they're called at PSU.

The capstone course is the culmination of the general education program. Capstone courses at PSU are designed by faculty members in collaboration with members of community organizations; rather than completing individual projects, students register as a cohort for the available course that most interests them. There are a number of reasons for this approach. For starters, it would be a strain on faculty time and the university budget to support four thousand individual capstone projects each year, especially if students are to interact with community partners.

But the more important reason is pedagogical, Kerrigan says. Learning in a group setting "is very different from studying something as an individual, like in an internship. I might be making meaning, but I'm not learning from my peers and from the context they bring, too'' Students can propose their own capstone projects and work with a community organization they have identified on their own, but they must still enroll in a faculty-led course and engage in regular discussion with other students about their experiences working with their community partners. Each year, about 140 students choose this option.

By putting faculty in charge of course development, the university can more easily ensure that each capstone is advancing the key learning outcomes, as the general education committee carefully examines each proposal. A university assessment team also does a brief survey of each course in the fourth week to ensure students are engaging with the learning outcomes, so faculty get real-time feedback on their teaching and can make adjustments if students seem to be struggling. With support from the director of assessment, the capstone faculty examine work samples in the aggregate at the end of the academic year, "so we have a lot of opportunities to learn about students' experienced Kerrigan says, and improve over time.

COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS

Each capstone course focuses on an issue directly affecting residents in local communities, and faculty identify local organizations that are working on this issue. Each faculty member also identifies a liaison within the organization who can help students identify specific problems they can address during their capstone course. PSU students have worked with the local K-12 school system, the Oregon state legislature, and dozens of nonprofit organizations. The last two years have seen the launch of a number of courses that are engaging students with the criminal justice system, including incarcerated individuals in prisons and juvenile detention centers.

"In my younger life, I had a lot of contact with law enforcement, so there was this part of me that wanted to explore juvenile justice as an adult in order to get closer to that younger part of myself," says Chris Riser, whose capstone course facilitated a writing and art workshop at a juvenile detention center.

Students in each course divide into smaller teams to work on specific, concrete projects— writing a grant, for example, or designing an educational program—that will meet a need of the organization. In cases where teams call for particular skills, such as with grant writing or developing a business plan, students with particular expertise gained from their majors or other activities may be placed on that team. With "direct services" such as tutoring and mentoring, teams are more likely to be formed around student schedules.

"Putting students in contact with organizations that have real needs and are providing real services to

communities and citizens—that is the best experience that any student can get," says Ross Turkus, a training and development officer at the Portland Water Bureau. Turkus serves as liaison to PSU's Water capstone, in which students have created marketing and educational products, including a board game, about the water bureau's purpose and projects.

It usually takes some time for students to become really comfortable working in the community, says faculty member Denissia Withers, who teaches capstones based on community food security. "But by about week four, they start to get it…. They're out there doing community development, raising money and getting things donated" for a community garden.

Often their enthusiasm comes from connecting with individuals in the community. "Over the course of the term, the PSU students start to really engage, and it usually happens when they start to connect with one kid," says Natalie Whisler, project coordinator at the Boys and Girls Club of Portland. "That's the 'aha' moment…when they start to realize they are not here for playtime; their showing up really means something to that kid."

While serving real community needs is an important part of the capstones, faculty also emphasize classroom discussion. Students complete weekly readings on community engagement and effective change-making, and they come together to discuss the readings and how these readings apply to what they have been doing in the community. That's part of why capstones are capped at sixteen students, Kerrigan says. "We're…trying to keep these courses in that seminar style where you can have deep conversations around difficult topics like race, class, gender, ability—I do think it changes the learning environment when you move it out of that small seminar."

The class meetings offer students a chance to be self-reflective learners, Kerrigan says, and to think consciously about the different leadership styles they are observing as they work together in the field. The diversity of students is part of what makes for a successful capstone team, says Izzy Lefebvre, community justice manager at the Multnomah County Department of Community Justice, who has served as a capstone liaison. "You have an English major with a business major with a social worker; all these walks of life that have to be part of the process."

ASSESSING SUCCESS

Although the capstone has been a central part of the PSU curriculum for many years, faculty continue to improve the capstone courses and the larger general education program through regular assessment. A student experience survey, administered to all capstone students at the end of the semester, asks students about course content and instructor pedagogical approaches. The quantitative responses are aggregated for comparison over time, while a smaller sample of comments are analyzed for qualitative feedback.

Students also give feedback during small group diagnostic sessions, focus groups conducted mid-term in about 20 percent of capstone courses each year in which an experienced capstone instructor visits a colleague's course to discuss content, community work, learning outcomes, and suggestions for improvement. Faculty also contribute to the capstone assessment process by creating and submitting eportfolios that include syllabi, assignment instructions, and examples of student work that demonstrate learning in group and community settings.

These assessments indicate whether students are achieving the intended learning outcomes and are self-aware about their learning and development. According to PSU's 2015 assessment report, "students report deep richness and meaning in their learnings from their capstones and often anticipate the ways they expect these learnings to serve them in the future…."

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

There are challenges in trying to provide capstone opportunities to all of PSU s seniors. Group capstones are more efficient than individual projects, but it's still a struggle to fund so many small classes.

Many adjuncts have been teaching capstone courses at PSU for ten or fifteen years, and their work is informed by deep experience in the community. "When you have someone who worked at Planned Parenthood, or did grant writing for the community for years, who worked with immigrants and refugees—they are able to weave that real-life learning into class," Kerrigan says. Adjunct instructors, of course, cost less than full-time faculty, and can be hired on a flexible basis. But though budgets are tight, Kerrigan says the university should consider offering full-time positions to some of those adjuncts who have been excelling for years.

 One new challenge comes from the growing number of students completing online degrees. Kerrigan comments, "How do we best facilitate community-based learning in an online environment, and what are the appropriate projects...? We've helped students learn grant writing online, and they can connect with community partners…. But when you get into issues of educational equity and you have not met the student face-to-face? When you don't know that student, and you're working to place them in a community with a vulnerable population—that gets complicated."

New opportunities keep emerging, too. "What's exciting to me is the prospect of alumni engagement," Kerrigan says. "We've done this for twenty years, graduating 4,000 students each year, and we're an urban university where 60 percent of our students stay in the area. Do you realize the impact you could have if you continued their engagement after the senior capstone? Can we keep convening, in person or online— make a blog where past students stay in touch with current students and other graduates around a particular issue? We're in a position to help them stay informed on the issues they addressed in their capstone. We can have our faculty members working on building and *sustaining* social change movements. That's an exciting opportunity on the horizon."

A Note to Readers

This Campus Profile represents one of many possible ways to make deep civic inquiry and engagement part of all postsecondary students' learning experience.

The profile was adapted from a 2017 AAC&U publication related to AAC&U's initiative on preparing students to do significant "signature" projects on issues important to the students and to society.

The case shows how signature work can prepare students to apply their higher learning to public issues and challenges. It also shows how civic inquiry and action can become deeply embedded in an institution's degree requirements, institutional culture, and reciprocal relationships with community-based partners.

Source: Wilson Peden, Sally Reed, and Kathy Wolfe, *Rising to the LEAP: Case Studies of Integrative Pathways to Student Signature Work* (Washington: DC. Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2017).

To order copies of the complete report, which features thirteen case studies of integrative learning and signature work, please visit www,aacu.org.