

THE SENIOR CAPSTONE EXPERIENCE:  
A SKETCH WITH VIGNETTES

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A BRIEF SKETCH

The Senior Capstone Course, as the General Education Committee has thought about and designed one version of it, is a culminating, integrated experience for all seniors who would work together with team members from various divisions to solve a real-world problem. The practicality of the problems would give the capstone a strong service component, in keeping with the idea that BYU-Idaho's academic programs should benefit the Church and society. Seniors from various majors would work together for a semester applying their general skills and specialized knowledge to a problem from the community or world.

**Capstone:**  
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Dividing the work into component parts and working in discreet units, the capstone teams would develop problem-solving, group teamwork, and critical thinking skills. The capstone would bridge the academic world with the world of work and the community. Students would be asked to bring all individual and collective knowledge and skills to bear on a genuine problem. Such work of integration would then be reported and shared on web sites and at the Capstone Fair or Conference. Benefits to students would be clear:

- working with teams of student experts
- solving a problem that could make people's lives better
- applying major and general knowledge and skills to a large problem
- preparing for the world of community and work
- synthesizing knowledge and skills

VIGNETTES

In an effort to dramatize the workings and benefits of the Senior Capstone Course I have envisioned four future scenes. I have purposely omitted detailed description of actual problems and solutions, thinking that such specificity would detract from my central purpose of showing the benefits and the interpersonal dynamic.

*A senior Capstone student meets with her BYU-Idaho instructor the second week of the semester, January, 2003*

– I had no idea previous capstone groups had done so much preliminary work on this problem.

- Were you impressed with their web page?
- I was. But more than that, just all the work. They sure set the standard for us.
- Do you feel like in a way you're an extension of those earlier groups?
- It almost seems like we're all part of the same team.
- But more to the point, how do you feel about your own capstone team?
- Much better. It took us a while to get to know each other. Then when we started debating the problems we wanted to work on, the personalities came out pretty fast.
- Do you see any big conflicts there?
- Well, we'll have to see. It's too early to tell. It will probably work out. We've got to work together, right? And the thing right now is just to get working on our own individual assignments.
- How do you feel about the balance among the various majors?
- Pretty good. I was a little worried about cliques at first. But that hasn't happened. Now that were narrowing the scope of our project and making specific assignments, it's more like we are each finding our niche. And there really are some impressive people on the team. I'm looking forward to getting to know them better. You know, this is a lot like I think it will be out in the work place.
- You are right there.

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*Bill Wheeler (BYU-Idaho, History, 2003) talks to his younger sister Sally, currently enrolled in the BYU-Idaho Senior Capstone Course, November 2006*

- Well, Sal, as you explain it, it doesn't sound like the capstone has changed all that much since my day.
- What would you say was the best part of it for you, looking back?
- Group problem solving that helped get me ready for my job right now.
- What do you mean?
- I'd worked on group problems before: ward councils when I was elders quorum president, some minor collaborative assignments in some of my undergraduate courses. But nothing of this scope where you had to put it all together.
- Did your teachers help you a lot?
- I remember thinking at first, Why don't these guys just tell us what to do. I realized later that their hanging back and observing after giving us just the most basic parameters was really wise.
- I think that will be really hard for me. I can follow through on assignments, but I'm not the most creative thinker in the world.

– You’ll be fine. You’ll know your discipline better than anyone else on your team. You’ll have to explain it to them, and you’ll have to put some thought into what your major knowledge can contribute to the solution of the problem.

– Were there any rough areas for you?

– Of course. A group is not always unified, though I think ours was exceptional. I’m still in touch with a couple of the people I met in there. And things did not always go well with trying to solve the problem. But any big problem like that has its sticking points.

– What did you do?

– Sprayed with WD-40. So what problem will you work on?

– Our assignment for the weekend is to read all the history on the web sites of the two projects we think we might choose. So you said this whole capstone thing helped with the job?

– I’m still using some of the skills I developed in there.

*Lyle Saunders (BYU-Idaho, Business, 2006) interviews for a job.*

– Lyle, I’ve looked over your resume, your letters, your transcript. An impressive portfolio.

– Thank you.

– I was particularly impressed with your work experience. The internship sounds like you learned a lot. And, of course, we like candidates with the LDS mission. We may get to those a little later. What I find myself really intrigued by is the (reading) Senior Capstone Experience at BYU-Idaho. Tell me about that.

– Well, our group of students with various majors met with two professors, decided upon a problem, defined and narrowed our problem, did research, and came up with a solution. That’s a very brief overview.

– How do you think that experience might help you working for our company?

– I certainly feel that I sharpened my problem solving skills. My perception is that your company is in the business of solving some pretty complex problems. I would also say that my critical thinking skills were honed. At first, the task seemed to our group almost formidable, but then as we broke it down into parts, looked at assumptions and previous models, we saw a way to use our training and expertise to crunch that problem down. I would also have to say my people skills were greatly developed.

– Did your work involve any field work?

– I was really luck that way. Though we could do most of our work through the documents and e-mail and Internet sources, our team was

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able to send three members of our team for a few days, to look at the problem first hand.

– That must have made the whole thing come alive for you.

– Well, it did, mostly through allowing us to see the people we had been corresponding with for months. I would say that visit really solidified my desire to work on these kinds of problems, as your company does.

*Two BYU-Idaho seniors sit in the Manwaring Center just prior to the keynote speaker at the Second Annual National Undergraduate Service Learning Conference April 2005*

– How do you feel about your presentation?

– I feel all right. How about you?

– A little nervous. When do you present?

– Right after the keynote. You present tomorrow don't you?

– Yes. Did you get a lot of help with the paper and your presentation materials?

– Our capstone team put a lot of work into generating the paper and then polishing it. But you know, although I'm always nervous at times like this, I really look forward to sharing our work with others. If anyone comes to the session I'm presenting in.

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– You have built it; they will come. When I first heard about the capstone course, I had no idea what it was, but then we met and then got excited about solving our problem. When we realized it had such a strong service component, that people's lives would actually be improved, it didn't seem like a burden at all.

– It was when our capstone group saw the service possibilities that we really started pulling together. It almost seems the place where the service projects we used to do in young men's and young women's met the real world and the world of my profession.

– I was surprised last night at dinner talking to those kids from Florida that so many college students across the country are into service learning. They had some terrific ideas. I've got to go into their web site and check some of that stuff out.

– If I could think of anything I would like BYU-Idaho to be known for, it's as a leader in this service learning movement. I guess I'm just glad to be a part of it. Good luck on your presentation.

– Yeah. You too. ☺