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1999 Senior Seminars/Capstone Courses Survey

In summer and early fall 1999, the National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition conducted the first National Survey of Senior Seminars/Capstone Courses. The purpose of the survey was to gather information on the characteristics, course types, goals, and assessment of senior seminars/capstone courses.

Chief Academic and Student Affairs Officers and Career Services Directors at regionally accredited institutions with upper division students were mailed a survey instrument with invitation to participate in the survey. A total of 1,683 institutions were invited to participate in the survey. A total of 707 institutions responded to the survey.

- » 4,285 survey invitations distributed at total 1,683 institutions
- » 1,028 surveys completed from 707 institutions (42% response rate)
- » 864 senior seminars/capstone courses reported at 543 institutions

<i>Total Number of Courses by Course Type (n=864)</i>	
Course Type	Percentage
Interdisciplinary capstone course (n = 141)	16.3%
Discipline or department-based course (n = 607)	70.3%
Career planning course (n = 26)	3.0%
Transition course (focusing on preparation for work, graduate school, or life after college) (n = 50)	5.8%
Other (n = 40)	4.6%

Course Goals

“According to the results of this survey, senior seminars and capstone courses are largely intended to cap learning within the academic major. When examined together the courses described by respondents are nearly four times more likely to focus on the academic major than they are to connecting the academic major to the work world, the second most frequently cited number one goal. However, the second and third most frequently marked number one goals both concern the work world” (Henscheid, 2000, p.11).

In terms of institutional type, public and private institutions share similar primary goals for senior seminars and capstone courses.

- » 50.9% primary goal to foster integration and synthesis within the academic major
- » 22.1% primary goal to either promote integration and connections between the academic major and the work world or to improve seniors’ career preparation and pre-professional development
- » 5.7% primary goal to promoting integration and connections between general education and the academic major
- » 5% primary goal to promote the coherence and relevance of general education

Instructional Responsibility

“This survey indicates that, overwhelmingly, academic faculty members are responsible for teaching senior seminars and capstone courses, as lone instructors or as members of instructional teams. Only three graduate students were reported to have exclusive responsibility for these courses and only two respondents reported that graduate students teach these courses in concert with others or that they would be selected from a list of choices” (Henscheid, 2000, p.15).

Results Attributed to First-Year Seminars by Institutional Affiliation (n = 322)

Instructional Staff	Exclusive Responsibility	As Part of a Team
Faculty	n = 565	n = 245
Career professionals	n = 37	n = 24
Community leaders	n = 21	n = 32
Other	n = 9	n = 7
Other student affairs professionals	n = 7	n = 6
Graduate students	n = 3	n = 3

Note. Totals do not add to 100%. Some sections of the same course are taught by different individuals.

- » 63.7% public institutions faculty teach alone
- » 55.5% private institutions faculty teach alone
- » 29% public institutions faculty team-teach
- » 27.8% private institutions faculty team-teach

Course Enrollment Levels

“The sections of senior seminars and capstone courses described in this survey are small, with 20% of the respondents noting that there are fewer than 10 students and in the sections they described. More than 80% of the respondents noted that sections of the courses enroll fewer than 30 students and only six respondents indicated that the senior seminar or capstone course section they described enroll 100 or more students” (Henscheid, 2000, p.18).

With regards to institutional type, 31% of public institutions enroll fewer than 30 students into senior seminars/capstone courses, while 50% of private institutions enroll fewer than 30.

The smallest sections of senior seminars and capstone courses are at institutions with total student enrollments of between 1,001 and 5,000. 85% of respondents indicated that these sections are kept at under 30 students. 70% of respondents from institutions with total student enrollments over 10,000 indicated that sections of their senior seminars and capstone courses are kept at under 30 students. These differences were statistically significant.

Regarding required enrollment, a total of 69.9% of respondents report senior seminars and capstone courses are required. Courses at public and private institutions are equally likely to be required. 4.7% of respondents indicated that senior seminars and capstone courses are required for none of their students. Courses at the largest institutions are slightly less likely to be required than courses at the smallest institutions. Courses at highly selective institutions are less likely to be required than courses at institutions of other selectivity levels.

Academic Credit and Grading Practices

“This survey suggests that credit is liberally applied to senior seminars and capstone courses. More than 20% of respondents indicated that these senior seminars and capstone courses grant four or more semester credits and less than 10% indicated that the courses carry just one semester credit. The practices between public and private institutions and among institutions of the three selectivity levels are somewhat different, with more private institutions offering semester credit and highly selective institutions offering more four or more semester credits,” (Henscheid, 2000, p.22).

Instructional Components

The types of instructional components required in senior seminars/capstone courses varied with oral presentations (75.1%) ranked as the highest, followed by major projects (71.9%), service-learning or community service (10.8%), educational travel (4.6%), paid or unpaid employment (3.5%), and work shadowing (3.2%).

Type of Credit Granted by Senior Seminars and Capstone Courses – All Courses by Institution Type (N=864)

Granting Credit	Institution Type	
	Public	Private
Yes	95.8% (n = 346)	95.2% (n = 479)
No	4.1% (n = 15)	4.7% (n = 24)
Type of Grade	Public	Private
Pass/fail	7.76% (n = 28)	7.16% (n = 36)
Letter grade	92.2% (n = 333)	92.8% (n = 467)
Credit Applied As	Public	Private
Core requirement	22.1% (n = 80)	26% (n = 131)
Elective	5.2% (n = 19)	4.7% (n = 24)
Major requirement	63.7% (n = 230)	61.4% (n = 309)
General education requirement	5.5% (n = 20)	5.1% (n = 26)
Other	3.3% (n = 12)	2.5% (n = 13)

In terms of institutional type differences, public institutions are more likely than private institutions to require group projects and final exams in their senior seminars and capstone courses. Also, private institutions are more likely to require the writing of a thesis than public institutions.

With regards to institution size, courses at large institutions are more likely to require group projects than courses at small institutions; while, courses at small institutions are more likely to require the writing of a thesis.

Length of Existence

“Of the 703 respondents completing the section of the length of time senior seminars and capstone courses have existed at their institutions, the 72.1% indicated that these courses were less than 15 years old. The most frequent response (33%) was between one and five years old. Courses at public and private, large and small, and high, medium, and low selectivity level institutions are similar in age.” (Henscheid, 2000, p.40).

Evaluation and Assessment Practices

Most respondents (79.6%) reported that senior seminars and capstone courses are evaluated, most often by the students and faculty members involved in the courses. “However, 20% of the respondents noted that the courses they described are not evaluated in any manner, with this holding true across institution type. Courses at the smallest (under 1,000 students) and next to largest (enrollments between 5,001 to 10,000) institutions are more likely to be evaluated than those at institutions with enrollments of between 1,001 to 5,000 and over 10,000. There is a slight positive correlation between institutional selectivity and existence of evaluation, with courses at more selective institutions being evaluated at a greater rate.” (Henscheid, 2000, p.44-45.)

With regard to assessment, courses at private institutions are more likely than courses at public institutions to be linked to comprehensive assessments. Courses at small institutions are more likely than courses at large institutions to be linked to comprehensive assessments. Also, courses at institutions of low selectivity are more likely to be linked to comprehensive assessments than courses at institutions of other selectivity levels.

More information on this survey can be found in *The First-Year Experience Monograph Series #30*.

“*Public institutions are more likely than private institutions to require group projects and final exams in their senior seminars and capstone courses.*”