

The Trusted Expert and
Internationally Recognized
Leader for all Postsecondary
Student Transitions

“Overwhelmingly,
course-based opportunities
represented the majority
of both discrete and
primary capstone
experiences at institutions
in this sample.”

2011 National Survey of Senior Capstone Experiences

In summer and fall of 2011, the National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition conducted the 2011 National Survey of Senior Capstone Experiences. The purpose of the Survey was to gather information on senior capstone courses and culminating experiences. Chief academic officers; chief executive officers; chief student affairs officers; and/or the primary campus representatives for career services, planning, and placement at regionally accredited institutions were emailed a link to the online survey instrument. The response rate was 7.8% with 276 institutions completing the survey. Of these respondents, 268 four-year institutions offered a senior capstone experience.

Among the 268 four-year institutions that reported offering a senior capstone experience, 37.1% were public institutions and 62.9% were private institutions. Additionally, an inverse relationship existed between offering a senior capstone experience and institutional size: nearly half of the institutions offering a senior capstone experience had a senior enrollment of less than 500 (43.9%) followed by 501-1,000 (20.2%), 1,001-3,000 (17.9%), and more than 3,001 (17.9%).

Types of Senior Capstone Experiences

Survey respondents were asked to identify all of the senior capstone experiences they offered their students (i.e., discrete experiences) as well as the capstone experience with the highest student enrollment (i.e., primary experience). Overwhelmingly, course-based opportunities represented the majority in both discrete and primary capstone experiences at institutions in this sample (Table 1).

Table 1. *Discrete and Primary Senior Capstone Experiences*

Type of senior capstone experience	Discrete senior capstone experience %	Primary senior capstone %
Discipline-based capstone course	84.7	59.6
Interdisciplinary capstone course	33.2	12.9
Comprehensive exam	20.1	2.4
Exhibition of performing, musical, or visual arts	58.2	1.2
Internship	46.6	3.9
Senior thesis or undergraduate research paper	64.6	12.9
Other	7.1	7.1

Note: Respondents were allowed to check “all that apply” for discrete senior capstone experience, while the primary senior capstone experience was directed toward the one senior capstone experience with the highest total enrollment on their campus.

Capstone Objectives, Topics, and Pedagogies

Institutions were asked to identify the three most important objectives for the senior capstone course or experience. The most frequently reported objective was the development of critical thinking, analytical, and/or problem-solving skills (49.6%) followed by ability to conduct scholarly research (27.6%), career preparation (25.0%), professional development (23.5%), and proficiency in written communication (23.5%). Similarly, 51.9% of responding institutions identified critical thinking, analytical skills, and/or problem-solving skills as one of the three most important topics within the senior capstone course or experience. Other

common topic categories covered in the capstone experience included a discipline-specific topic (43.3%), scholarly research competencies (26.5%), writing skills (20.9%), and team or group work proficiencies (16.8%). Respondents were also asked to select the vetted good practices that were included within the senior capstone course or experience (Table 2).

Table 2. *Inclusion of Good Practices within Senior Courses or Experiences*

Good Practices	%
Communication of high expectations	57.1
Cooperative learning	38.4
Academically challenging course	55.2
Diversity experiences	14.2
Emphasis on time on task and submitting work	28.4
Instructor encouragement of active learning	45.1
Integrative learning (between courses or between coursework and life)	60.1
Quality classroom interactions with instructor	26.5
Quality nonclassroom interactions with instructor	17.2
Positive peer interactions	32.5
Prompt feedback from instructor	26.1
Use of higher-order exams and assignments	29.9
Other	3.4

Note: Respondents were allowed to check all that apply.

Capstone Credit, Administration, and Instruction

Almost all respondents (98.5%) reported that the senior capstone course or experience carried academic credit. Among respondents with a discipline-based or interdisciplinary course as the primary senior capstone experience, the majority stated the courses were letter graded (93.3% and 96.6%, respectively), while only 70.4% offering a project-based primary senior capstone experience indicated that it was letter graded. Further, approximately two thirds (68.9%) of all respondents reported that the senior capstone course or experience was administered through an academic department, followed by academic affairs (16.3%) and a college or school (10.7%). More than 75% of respondents indicated that either tenure-track (57.8%) or full-time, non-tenure-track (18.3%) faculty were the primary instructor pools for the senior capstone experience with adjunct faculty and academic affairs professionals teaching the capstone at 10.0% and 7.5% of the institutions respectively.

Assessment

More than half (55.7%) of all respondents reported that formal assessment or evaluation had taken place within the last three years, 31.3% did not undertake formal assessment, and 13.0% were unsure if assessment was conducted. Among those respondents that reported formal assessment or evaluation had occurred, 74.8% used course evaluations as the primary method of assessment, followed by analysis of institutional data (62.6%), accreditation processes (60.7%), and using a survey instrument (43.0%). Institutional responses indicated that these assessment data were most often used to measure critical thinking, analytical skills, and/or problem-solving skills (71.0%), written communication (44.9%), connection to the discipline(s) (38.3%), oral communication (28.0%), and satisfaction with the instructor (14.0%).

For more information on the 2011 National Survey of Senior Capstone Experiences, please visit www.sc.edu/fye.