

# Going Beyond the Requirement: The Capstone Experience

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For many years, University of La Verne students have completed capstone projects that build on their primary academic focuses developed in their junior and senior years and allow for greater understanding and clarity about their intended professional focus post-graduation. Today, the University of La Verne is working to take capstone courses to the next level, preparing students earlier than ever before to begin thinking strategically about their areas of study, their professions, and the values they would embody long after graduation.

The University of La Verne is located in the town of La Verne, 35 miles east of downtown Los Angeles. The university is a Carnegie doctoral/research university that enrolls more than 8,600 students across four colleges (business, education, arts and sciences, and law), at the main campus in the city of La Verne and at ten off-campus sites throughout Southern California. With a strong heritage emphasizing caring, rigorous academic programs, and commitment to a diverse student body, the University of La Verne prepares students to be ready to face the world upon graduation.

## THE LA VERNE CAPSTONE

In 2009, the university implemented a Capstone Assessment Project. It was the purpose of this project to evaluate the extent to which students were meeting and exceeding learning outcomes related to writing and the university's mission. Undergraduate, master's, and doctoral level capstones were examined. A total of 127 capstone projects were collected, 41 of them undergraduate senior projects, representing three colleges. The study concluded that empirical and applied projects best reflected the elements of the institutional mission. Writing in the capstone projects was effective in mechanics, organization, and formatting, with room for improvement in thesis development and citations.

Rubrics were then developed as a part of this study, and the colleges were encouraged to use the rubrics to continuously evaluate

the learning outcomes and their relationship to the values of the institution.

As a result of this research, reflection has been embedded throughout the four years an undergraduate student studies at the University of La Verne. Students are challenged to look within themselves for a sense of their efforts and their academic work in the context of their own values and lives. Students are to ask themselves the questions, "What is it?" "Why do we do it?" "Is it important?"

Through the La Verne Experience, each first-year student participates in a First Year La Verne Experience (FLEX) learning community composed of three linked courses (two discipline-based courses and a writing course). Through the FLEX, students in the writing courses reflect on the connection between the two disciplinary courses and community engagement activities that bring the theory of the course to the practice in the community.

The capstones culminate students' academic journeys. Each capstone is curriculum-based, yet represents the uniqueness of the program for which it was designed. Today, this capstone is wedded with the final opportunity for students to reflect on their total program at the University of La Verne, both curricular and cocurricular. Each senior student is part of a one-unit course designed to facilitate students' reflections over their time at the university. Through these two activities, the students are preparing to thrive either professionally, through a career, or academically via graduate school. Student reflection continues through the four years, concluding with a final autobiography essay that includes contemplation on the La Verne Experience and its connection to the university values.

## CONNECTING CAPSTONES TO CORE VALUES

The University of La Verne has a long history of embedding the values of the institution with the capstone experience of its students. These four core values have been a part of this institution since its inception in 1891:

- Through *ethical reasoning*, students are encouraged to become reflective about professional, personal, and societal values.
  - In the context of society, *diversity and inclusivity* are seen as primary values through appreciation of the diversity of cultures that exist locally, nationally, and globally.
  - A spirit and attitude of *lifelong learning* is fostered during time at La Verne, in both curricular and cocurricular activities.
  - *Community and civic engagement* are seen as primary goals of the educated person. Students are supported in opportunities to experience the responsibilities and rewards of serving the community.
- These values are threaded throughout the academic programs, as well as the foundation of the cocurricular activities.

## THE LA VERNE EXPERIENCE

As soon as an undergraduate student sets foot on campus, his/her La Verne Experience begins with the FLEX program and continues through graduation. Each student becomes a member of a community dedicated to making connections, to communicating effectively, and to reflecting on learning.

Hayley Hulin, now a sophomore student, shares the following reflection on her introduction to the La Verne Experience. “Before I started classes as a freshman, I participated in Community Engagement Day with nearly 600 of my freshman peers and La Verne faculty,” she said and described her experience volunteering at a domestic abuse shelter for women and children in Los Angeles. “I helped paint houses for these families and spent time gardening. I really appreciated watching the faculty (some of whom were subsequently my professors), who spent the day working alongside us.

“I was able to talk to my professors before I experienced them in the classroom. We had the chance to be human together, working toward the same thing, and that

created a respect and admiration in me for them. The chance to talk personally about what we were doing meant so much to me and it made me reflect on the person I am today and also the person I hope to be after my time here at La Verne.”

In the sophomore year, each student takes a one- or two-unit Sophomore La Verne Experience (SoLVE) class connecting curricular with cocurricular experiences. In this class, the students explore the richness of La Verne life beyond the classroom. This class focuses on La Verne values, diversity, and the e-portfolio.

During the junior year, participation in a learning community includes two or three major classes. These classes include an integrated curriculum and feature reflective learning. As a part of the senior year, each student completes a capstone class in the

major plus a one- or two-unit class focused on completing the e-portfolio and reflecting on the total La Verne Experience, La Verne values, and curricular and cocurricular experiences.

Community engagement is linked with the La Verne Experience in many ways. Each first-year student participates in a community engagement day as part of orientation. During the sophomore, junior, and senior years, students complete internships and then link those experiences to classroom content, always with the reflective eye toward learning. Community partners are an important link to this part of the La Verne Experience.

First-year student Jacob Pavlovics is an example of one student who has benefitted from this program. After recently volunteering to serve ice cream to the homeless

## AAC&U Resources on Capstones and Integrative Learning

### Ensuring Quality & Taking High-Impact Practices to Scale (2013)

By George D. Kuh and Ken O'Donnell



This publication presents research on specific educational practices correlated with higher levels of academic challenge, student engagement, and achievement. It features the relationship between these practices and improvements in retention and graduation rates and advice on how to ensure that all students experience multiple high-impact practices.

### Five High-Impact Practices: Research on Learning Outcomes, Completion, and Quality (2010)

By Jane Brownell and Lynn Swaner



This monograph examines what educational research reveals about five educational practices: first-year seminars, learning communities, service learning, undergraduate research, and capstone experiences.

### High-Impact Educational Practices: What They Are, Who Has Access to Them, and Why They Matter (2008)

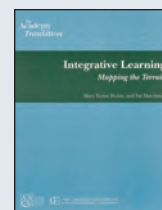
By George D. Kuh



This publication defines a set of educational practices that research has demonstrated have a significant impact on student success.

### Integrative Learning: Mapping the Terrain (2005)

By Mary Taylor Huber and Pat Hutchings



Published by AAC&U and the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, this publication explores the challenges to integrative learning today as well as its longer tradition and rationale within a vision of liberal education.



during the hot summer at the Union Rescue Mission in downtown Los Angeles, he completed the experience feeling a deep sense of reflection a his own life.

“It felt like so many people were lined up,” said Jacob, who had never been to Los Angeles before. “They were so grateful to get a bowl of melting ice cream and while I was serving them, a part of me felt awakened to the fact that I can brighten someone’s day with my actions. I have volunteered before, that is how I was raised, but this experience and doing it alongside my fellow classmates—all of us working together—it had a bigger impact on me, and I understood the value of what I was doing more.”

### REFLECTION THROUGH E-PORTFOLIOS

With reflection as an underlying goal of the La Verne Experience, an electronic portfolio (e-portfolio) is included in the program to provide the vehicle to capture reflective essays and blogs from each student. As with

the university. For students, reflection is promoted; for faculty, evidence of student learning is collected and assessed; and for the university, progress toward institutional goals is evaluated.

In concert with the development of the e-portfolio project, the university adopted baccalaureate goals for all undergraduates to further integrate reflection into the learning process throughout the student’s academic journey. Every student from the university is expected to graduate with

- broad knowledge and appreciation of the liberal arts integrated with a depth of knowledge in a specialized discipline;
- the ability to think critically and creatively, and apply those skills toward resolution of local, national, and global problems;
- excellence in written, oral, and creative expression through a variety of traditional and contemporary media;
- effective leadership and teamwork skills with cultural competence;
- a commitment to ethical, environmental,

years at La Verne and the effect of the values on their growth. First-year students provide a reflective piece for their portfolios under the guidance of the writing class as part of their FLEX group. As a part of the SoLVE class in the sophomore year, students receive training on how to manage the portfolio. Staff from the university’s Learning Enhancement Center and library help provide ongoing support for student technology needs and support. This reflective process culminates in a course where each student presents his or her portfolio to peers under the guidance of either a curricular or cocurricular mentor.

### COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

Currently the university is involved in a program with the city of Pomona (located a few miles from the La Verne campus) to explore mutually beneficial projects that create learning opportunities for our students, academic partnerships for faculty, cocurricular interest, and support for the important work of our community partners. At the heart of these partnerships are the Association of American Colleges and Universities’ Liberal Education and America’s Promise (LEAP) Essential Learning Outcomes.

After all, the integration of curricular and cocurricular aspects of the student experience in the capstone activity is the key to developing effective graduates who go on to integrate the LEAP goals into life after the university. These goals encompass (1) knowledge of human cultures and the physical and natural world, (2) intellectual and practical skills, (3) personal and social responsibility, and (4) integrative and applied learning.

Last year, faculty met with educators in the community in a meeting cosponsored by the superintendent of schools from nearby Pomona Unified School District. The Pomona associate superintendent and La Verne’s director of community and civic engagement were charged with developing a plan of action from the data gathered at

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all successful initiatives, faculty acceptance and participation in the process is essential. A faculty and staff committee representing all four colleges collaborated to find the best way to integrate the e-portfolio into the La Verne Experience, and developed a vision for the student e-portfolio: “The e-portfolio is a collection of evidence that demonstrates the integration of university values through curricular and cocurricular experiences.” This vision helps to benefit all groups at

and social responsibility, accompanied by civic and community engagement.

These goals undergird the e-portfolio project. As the assessment structure for the e-portfolio is finalized, the baccalaureate goals, the university values, and the program-specific standards provide the means for robust evaluation.

Students, in their reflections, address one of the university’s core values each year, culminating in an autobiography of their

this meeting. It proved to be an excellent exchange of ideas, and the participants developed ways to promote the ideas for future projects. The day clearly addressed the LEAP goal of supporting students in integrative and applied learning.

The event with educators was followed by a session on business and economic development, also attended by faculty and community partners. Again, the goal of the meeting was to foster partnerships and develop clear follow-up objectives. This year, there will be meetings on social justice and community empowerment and health and wellness. These facilitated meetings bring together representatives from the university's community partners for conversation and action. University representatives include faculty who are interested in integrating community engagement as part of their courses, research, and scholarship and diverse Pomona community partners who have an interest in linking community-based opportunities to curricular and cocurricular projects.

### **INTEGRATION AND THE CAPSTONE**

When a student completes a degree, the power of integration between what they have learned and their capstone experience should be evident. At La Verne, from the beginning of the student experience, with the FLEX linked courses, to the completion of the capstone experience, the student is asked to reflect and comment on his/her experience. Each student describes and integrates the experience in a unique way. The marketing student may identify growth through the complexities of developing a marketing plan in partnership with a local business or nonprofit organization. The education student sees learning in the development of a unit including lessons that cut across many disciplines, preparing him or her for the multiple-subject classroom. A student in psychology completes a senior project that takes the student and faculty member to a conference where they are

major presenters. All of these pathways can be part of the capstone, a critical force in integrating classroom learning and practical application.

Recent alumna Desiree Vera, a biology major, completed a capstone course at La Verne. In addition to developing her thesis, "The Effects of Insulin and Cortisol on a Young and Older Population," Desiree also received one-on-one preparation from faculty members on how to best prepare for a career outside of school.

"I was shown how to build a resume, how to utilize what I learned and express it through my writing," she said.

"In fact, it was my capstone course that brought to light my passion for research, which I did not know existed until I was in my junior/senior year. The faculty worked hard to thread the curriculum and the university's core values together where I could identify my strengths and focus more on what I hoped to do post-graduation."

Desiree has since applied to nursing school, where she hopes to study to become a registered nurse. She credits La Verne and her capstone experience for the skills she has and believes that her capstone and La Verne experience has provided her with the skills necessary to succeed. Desiree is just one example of how the capstone is the culmination of a student's experience at the University of La Verne. As a student completes this portion of the La Verne Experience, we see the emergence of a developed person who has integrated all the experiences and merged them, becoming one who, upon graduation, is not only competitive in the job market, but also one who is ready to face the world. Armed with the skills, the theory, and the ability to form and nurture relationships, she represents the growth and maturity shaped by her experience at La Verne. ■

## **AAC&U MEETINGS**

### **NETWORK MEETINGS**

#### **General Education and Assessment Disruptions, Innovations, and Opportunities**

February 27–March 1, 2014  
Portland, Oregon

#### **Diversity, Learning, and Student Success Policy, Practice, Privilege**

March 27–29, 2014  
Chicago, Illinois

### **SUMMER INSTITUTES**

#### **Institute on General Education and Assessment**

June 3–7, 2014  
University of Vermont, Burlington

#### **Institute on High-Impact Practices and Student Success**

June 17–21, 2014  
Vanderbilt University, Nashville

#### **Institute on Integrative Learning and the Departments**

July 9–13, 2014  
California State University, Fullerton

#### **PKAL Summer Leadership Institute for STEM Faculty**

July 18–23, 2014  
Pendle Hill, Wallingford, Pennsylvania  
July 25–30, 2014  
Baca Campus of Colorado College,  
Crestone, Colorado

[www.aacu.org/meetings](http://www.aacu.org/meetings)

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