



Bonner Capstones

Culminating Your Bonner Journey with a Community-Engaged Signature Work Project

What is a Bonner Capstone?

Bonner Capstones can produce work that is valuable **for students' academic learning** and **for a community partner or constituency**. Thus, the student or students conducts a project in collaboration with a partner and a faculty or staff mentor. So, a junior or senior who does a Bonner Capstone may create a tangible product for different audiences. A Bonner Capstone should have the following three elements:

- **The Capstone has a clearly defined purpose for a community** partner or constituency (which may be defined as a school, nonprofit, government agency, neighborhood, town, city, state, or place. Ideally, the student can work with a partner advisor.).
- **The Capstone allows the student to apply academic and experiential learning** (which may include major, minor, coursework, extracurricular activities, and Bonner experiences).
- **It involves a staff or faculty mentor** (who can provide structure, help, feedback, and other supports. This may or may not involve credit).

Examples:

Bonner Capstones can be independent or team projects. They allow students to delve more deeply into applying their own experience and knowledge to addressing a real issue or need. Ideally, these projects are grounded in the request of a real community partner. But some, like public history or arts projects, may address a broader cultural need. Capstones are not required to have academic credit, but they often can through linked coursework in one's major, minor, or independent study. These capstones link with Bonner Scholars and Leaders' ongoing efforts to build capacity of local organizations, schools, and communities in areas like:

- **Volunteer Management (also called Service Leadership):** In this area, students develop and manage others who work at an agency. Typical capstone products include a Volunteer Management Structure, Handbook, Training Manual or other resources for a site. A student might tie this to a major (like Leadership, Economics, Business, or Education) by reviewing the literature from the discipline while carrying out such projects, producing a written report and set of recommendations.
- **Program Development:** In this area, students create new programs, curriculum, trainings, or other programmatic resources for a school, nonprofit, or social enterprise. Typical capstone products take those forms. While obviously a good fit for Education majors, these projects can work for students in any discipline, especially as they apply learning from that field. For instance, a STEM major could write curriculum in Science and Technology for a local school. A Business major could create trainings on business plan development for

adult learners. A Music major might create a mobile van that builds community through arts. A Math major might help a local Sports Academy develop ways to teach algebra and geometry through athletics. These creative examples illustrate just a few possibilities.

- **Communications and Technology:** In this area, students use their talents and learning in areas like marketing, writing, website development, social media, etc. to build the capacity of community-based initiatives and programs. So, a Marketing major might develop a new brand and logo for a nonprofit. A student with social media savvy might help an agency scale their outreach efforts. A Computer Science programmer might develop new games to teach reading for an elementary school (showing how these categories often overlap).
- **Fundraising:** In this area, students do research for grants, write funding proposals, or raise funds and resources through creative means. A Business major might help a non-profit develop a multifaceted earned income revenue stream for its work. An English major can write grants. A computer scientist might help the local Goodwill develop a program that determines which donated items could earn the most through online sales on ebay (yes, that was a real project). A Communications major might develop marketing materials for an annual giving and donor drive.
- **Research:** In this area, students can engage in a range of different research – such as community-based research, public policy research, program evaluation, needs assessments, survey development, oral histories, etc. This can involve both qualitative or quantitative methods (like surveys, statistical analysis, etc.). Here, typically the need identified by a partner or community (i.e., safe drinking water, equitable schools, childcare for working parents, etc.) is translated into a research question and approach. But at the end, the student(s) also share what they learn and find with the partner and community. Again, any discipline can be linked with such examples. A Spanish major might practice her mastery through a project carried out in English and Spanish. An Anthropology major might apply his understanding of field work and oral histories. A Political Science major might
- **Disciplinary Projects:** Sometimes, there are projects that fall outside these bounds where the student is doing something creative. For instance, a Theater major might write and produce a play based on local history for a nearby church. A Journalism major might produce a series on a current issue. A History major might curate a new exhibition for the local city museum. Think about your own interests and what social justice and equity issues have arisen through your Bonner work and reflection.
- **Social Action:** Finally, students might also become so passionate and aware about a local, state, national, or even international issue that they want to design and carry out a social action campaign. Here, students are likely to work as a team on their capstone, and the product is something different – like awareness, new policies, or other structural changes. Some institutions in the Bonner Network are replicating a course where students learn this skill. So, here too, students could be enrolling in a related course while they carry out these projects.

How does a Bonner Capstone link to Curriculum:

Bonner Capstones are high-impact educational practice, proven to link with positive gains in students' development of critical thinking, analysis, writing abilities, communication, integrative

learning, and other skills valued by graduates and employers (Kinzie, 2013). They can also be called **Signature Work**, a term coined by the Liberal Education and America's Promise (LEAP) Initiative of the Association of American Colleges and Universities, where students integrate, apply, demonstrate, reflect on, and communicate their cumulative learning in a project or activity lasting at least one semester. Ideally, in such a project students wrestle with complex questions that matter to them and to society. Rather than simply doing a capstone that produces a paper for a grade, students can produce something of value to a designated community partner (such as a nonprofit organization, school, government agency, or constituency). In doing so, this work is an expression of community service and engagement, allowing the Bonner Scholar or Leader to do something that makes a positive impact. The student leaves a legacy, while honing skills and knowledge that will prove valuable for his or her post-graduate pursuits like employment or graduate school. Finally, the research suggests that doing such capstones are linked with greater student success and degree completion (Finley & McNair, 2014). Moreover, students of color and students from low-income backgrounds often have fewer opportunities in college to be engaged in such work, making it all the more important that Bonner Programs provide these opportunities and supports to our students. While the Capstone does not have to have credit, students who wish to pursue getting credit for their capstones (*and these projects DO count for hours*) might consider:

- Checking with their **majors (many culminate in a capstone)**
- Checking with their **minors (which often culminate in a capstone)**
- Enrolling in a **related course** (lab courses, methods courses, and others might also connect)
- Asking a **faculty advisor or mentor** to recommend a course
- Asking for an **independent study**

Summary: The table below captures this information in a more concise way.

Category of Projects	Common Products for the Partner	Especially Good Fit for These Disciplines (Majors or Minors) or Types of Courses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Volunteer Management (also called Service Leadership) 	Volunteer Training Volunteer Handbook Volunteer Retention Analysis Human Resources Strategy	Leadership Education Business Civic Engagement
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Program (and Organizational) Development 	Curriculum Development Program Development Program Replication Business Plan	Any major might apply disciplinary concepts (i.e., STEM Fields Math Education Business

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<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communications and Technology 	Website Social Media Computer Program Marketing Plan	Communications/PR Marketing Computer Science Methods courses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fundraising 	Grant Research Grant Writing Earned Income Strategy	English Nonprofit Management Business Social Entrepreneurism
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Research 	Applied Research Action Research Community-Based Research Public Policy Research Program Evaluation Oral Histories Needs Assessment Qualitative Study (for community need) Quantitative Study (for community need)	Often great for the Social Sciences: Public Policy Political Science Sociology Psychology Anthropology Social Work Biology
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creative/ Disciplinary Projects 	Theater Production Arts Production Journalism Project Community Forum	Drama Arts Humanities Journalism Food Justice Communication Studies
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social Action 	Campaign Policy Recommendation	Sociology Political Science Public Policy Social Justice