



The Bonner Foundation

CAPSTONE PROJECTS

How to Use Capstone Projects to Increase Student Success

Our Graduated Seniors Completed Capstone Projects that were ...

SUSTAINABLE

Sustainable capstone projects build capacity at the community partner in a long-term, tangible format. In an interview with a graduated senior, the Foundation learned how proud a student was to have contributed to their community partner's long-term growth "knowing that they're on a path to increasing their diversity equity, inclusion initiatives and improving their programs and just like working hard to look inward and improve."

RELATIONSHIP FOCUSED

Relationship centered projects are built on trust and mutual respect. When the foundation exists for deep collaboration, students are able to clearly identify gaps in services and contribute to their community partners in meaningful ways. One student believed that this aspect of her capstone experience was key because "so much of [the project] was simply spending time there and the observations that [she] was able to have in [the] relationships that [she] developed over these four years, that really aided [her] ability to see like, okay, where's the gap right now?"

STUDENT GROWTH ORIENTED

Meaningful capstone projects exist within a sweet spot of academic passions, identity, and community engagement. When these converge, student growth is fostered. Students frequently cited the skills and knowledge they gained through the capstone experience in Foundation interviews. Given the messy and often unpredictable nature of community engaged projects, several students cited their increased capacity to adapt and be "flexible and work with the changes that you have." For this student, flexibility "has definitely been something that [she didn't think] was a strength prior, but is slowly becoming a strength of [hers]."

And They Built Capacity through Projects that Employed ...

RESEARCH

**PROGRAM
DEVELOPMENT**

**MARKETING
&
COMMUNICATIONS**

**VOLUNTEER
MANAGEMENT**

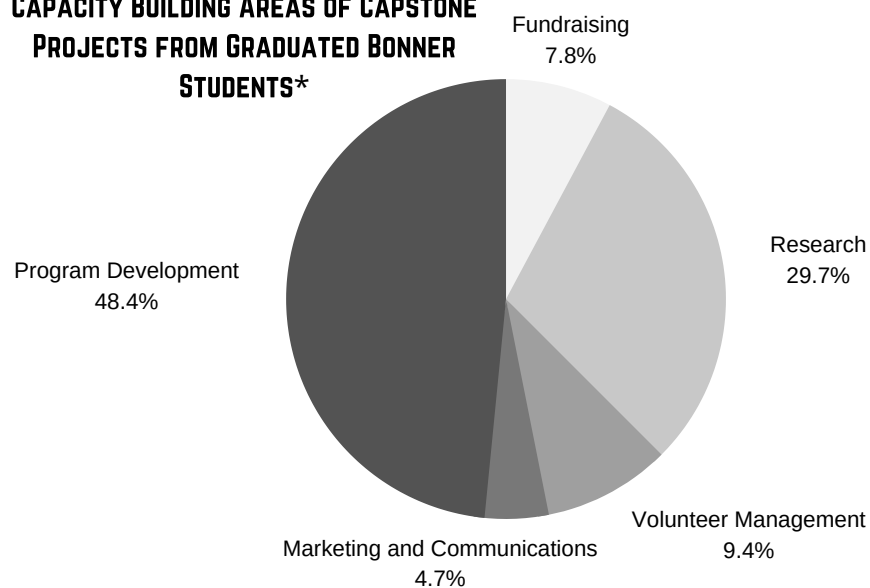
FUNDRAISING

SO WHAT CAN YOUR PROGRAM DO?

- Get faculty involved! Community partners indicate a desire for more faculty involvement (Worrall 2007) and students benefit when their academic interests align with the community's needs.
- Capstone projects should be conducted at the community partner where the student has spent most of their time. These relationships should already be in existence when a student begins their project.
- Emphasize sustainability! How will this project be used when the student has graduated? 3 years post graduation?
- Encourage students to choose a capstone project in a passion area.
- Utilize the **Foundation's Capstone curriculum!**



CAPACITY BUILDING AREAS OF CAPSTONE PROJECTS FROM GRADUATED BONNER STUDENTS*



*Data from the 2020 Bonner Foundation's Annual Student Impact Survey

THE IMPORTANCE OF SUSTAINED COMMUNITY PARTNER RELATIONSHIPS

Lessons from a Graduated Bonner Student and their Capstone Experience

They introduced themselves as an intern at their community partner at the start of our interview. The graduated senior explained that they viewed themselves as a part of their community based organization's team, a relationship too developed for the term, "volunteer." They had spent their entire career as a Bonner at the same service site. Invested in the mission of the organization and committed to supporting the staff at the non-profit, they drew from their classroom experiences in HR and social justice values to gather literature and research practices that could contribute to the diversity, equity, and inclusion at their service site. When asked about their process for their capstone project, they emphasized the importance of the sustained relationship they had created with their community partner prior to beginning their capstone.

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Fortunately I had the benefit of time. My community partner and I had established a trusting relationship ... all those experiences leading up to my final project [made it] so they were on board right away

LET'S TAKE A DEEPER LOOK

The Capstone Project is meant to serve as a mutually beneficial capacity building project between the Bonner student, university, and community partner. By contributing to their community partner through capacity building projects, students have the opportunity to expand their knowledge, contribute to the growth of their community partner, and in turn, strengthen the ties between the university and the community.

By facilitating Capstone Projects, a high-impact practice, across the network, the Bonner Program is contributing to student success by heeding George Kuh's finding that the completion of two high impact experiences during a student's tenure at a university contributes to "a students retention and student engagement" (2008). But, to create a fully transformative framework for the capstone experience, "service learning needs to align university goals with community goals" (Verjee 2010). This requires deep engagement from the community partner and student, something that came up repeatedly during interviews the Foundation held with seniors who had completed capstone projects. See the text box on the right for a deeper explanation and refer to the recommendations on the previous page for ways to achieve this goal on your campus.

Bonnors, students with a prolonged relationship to their community partner, have the ability to increase the capacity of their community partner through their capstone experience in the form of sustainable programming and development. By creating programs and resources that do not require significant amounts of upkeep from the community partner once the student has graduated, the ability for a community partner to maintain their relationship with the university and take on more students for future service-learning experiences in the future is expanded (Littlepage et al. 2012). Several students in the Network have already indicated that their capstone projects are sustainable. These projects serve as a model for transformative service-learning and can be categorized as a high impact practice.

By centering relationships, sustainability, and student growth in the capstone project process, Bonner Programs across the network can enhance student success.

Kuh, G. D., & Schneider, C. G. (2008). High-Impact Educational Practices: What They Are, Who Has Access to Them, and Why They Matter. Assn of Amer Colleges.

Littlepage, L., Gazley, B., & Bennett, T. A. (2012). Service learning from the supply side: Community capacity to engage students. *Nonprofit Management & Leadership*, 22(3), 305–320. <https://doi.org/10.1002/nml.20056>

Verjee, B. (2010). Service-Learning: Charity-Based or Transformative? 4(2), 13.

Worrall, L. (2007). Asking the community: A case study of community partner perspectives. *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning*, 14(1), 5+. Gale Academic OneFile.