

Efficacy of a New Capstone Course in an Undergraduate Psychology Program

Poster Paper

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Abstract

In response to the APA call for explicit “capstone” experiences, we developed a new capstone course and examined the efficacy of the new course in an undergraduate psychology program. Grading rubrics for a capstone portfolio and student surveys were collected and analyzed. Students were meeting program goals to a significant degree and were generally satisfied with the course. As expected, students expecting higher grades for the course indicated greater satisfaction with the course. Students planning on attending graduate school had higher scores on all portfolio areas (goals, writing, overall points) while those planning on employment had significantly higher resume scores. Students taking the capstone course in their last term had significantly higher portfolio scores.

Introduction

In 2008, the National Conference on Undergraduate Education in Psychology drafted quality principles for undergraduate education in psychology (APA Board of Education Affairs, 2008). National Conference attendees called for more effective program assessment, developmentally coherent curricula, and creating capstone experiences for the psychology major.

Following the APA's (2007) recommended learning outcomes for psychology education and the conference in 2008, Halpern (2009) created a text outlining these into blueprints for the future for undergraduate education in psychology.

According to the *APA Assessment Cyber Guide*, a capstone is a class in which senior psychology majors are required to pull together what they have learned in their previous classes and use this integrating experience to demonstrate skills and dispositions acquired from the program (Pusateri, Halonen, Hill, & McCarthy, 2009). The purpose of capstone classes is to provide students with an opportunity "to demonstrate comprehensive learning in their major through some type of product or performance" (Palomba & Banta, 1999, p. 124). Many authors describe capstone courses as being directed towards assisting students in preparing for job searches and/or graduate school (e.g., Roscoe & Strapp, 2009). In addition to the opportunity to demonstrate comprehensive learning and preparedness, capstones can also provide psychology departments an opportunity to assess whether or not they have been successful in producing competent majors as well as use results to improve the curriculum. Thus, we may be able to use capstone experiences for program as well as individual student assessment. Roscoe and Strapp (2009) noted that while several authors overview course content, there is inadequate research regarding ratings and evaluations of assignments and impact of capstone courses.

Portfolios for assessing student outcomes have long been recognized in primary and secondary schools and more recently in higher education. While some psychology programs are beginning to require them, there are calls for evaluation of portfolio contents, use, reliability, and effectiveness (Dunn et al., 2004). Research on portfolio use in psychology programs is limited. In effect, the existing literature generally supports the use and effectiveness of capstone courses

and portfolios but is limited to a few single course and individual college examples. In addition, the majority of this research is focused upon student satisfaction or opinions regarding preparation for the future.

Based on results of our ongoing program assessment, we revised our Psychological Issues and Social Values course to function as a capstone experience in the curriculum. In the revised course, the major assignment is the creation of a comprehensive portfolio in which students are asked to demonstrate their writing skills and proficiencies in the ten APA learning outcomes (which are our program outcomes). They also present evidence of their preparation for future education or employment (e.g., recommendation letters, applications). Faculty in our program developed a common rubric for all capstone portfolios. We also solicited student satisfaction and feelings of efficacy via an anonymous survey at the end of the capstone course. The purpose of this study was to evaluate the degree to which students were able to demonstrate achievement of program goals, writing skills, clear goals for the future, satisfaction with the new course and portfolio, and overall portfolio execution. We also investigated whether there were differences in these areas on the basis of student grades for the course, future plans (employment or graduate school), and when the student completed the capstone course.

Methods

The participants of the study were students enrolled in a new undergraduate capstone course, in the psychology program at a public university on the south side of Chicago. The average age of students at the university is 34 years old. Enrollment at the school is approximately 45% minority. The 91 participants were students enrolled in seven sections of capstone course at the university. Students were asked to participate in the study and were told

the purpose of the research was to assess the effectiveness of the new capstone course, student satisfaction, and curriculum outcomes upon course completion. Students were informed they would be asked to complete questionnaires and that copies of their portfolio rubrics would be analyzed. In addition, students were told their information would be confidential (for the portfolio rubric), anonymous (for the satisfaction survey), and that their participation in the survey was voluntary. We collected completed copies of a common portfolio grading rubric for all seven sections of the course from the course professors and administered an anonymous student survey regarding the course at the end of the term.

Results

We collected data from students in seven sections over one year. The sections ranged from 9-21 students per section ($M = 13$, $n = 91$ surveys, $n = 90$ portfolio rubrics).

Portfolio Performance

There were generally high grades for the course (those close to failing tended to withdraw) with 76% A, 18% B, 6% C or below. Students scored significantly above average in demonstrations of meeting the program goals (average scores ranged from 4.71-5.04 out of 6, $p < .001$).

In terms of future plans, 66% of the students completed the graduate school portion and 34% completed the employment portion (aligned with national averages of psychology majors' future plans). Students planning on attending graduate school had better grades for the course ($p = .008$), clearer goal statements ($p = .081$), higher scores on the 10 program goals ($.023 < p < .353$), higher average paper scores ($p = .193$), and higher overall points for the portfolio ($p =$

.019) than those planning on seeking employment. Students planning on seeking employment had higher scores on their resumes ($p = .028$) than those planning on graduate school.

We also investigated differences on the basis of when the student completed the capstone course. Students taking the capstone in their last semester had significantly higher total points earned for their portfolios than those completing the capstone earlier [$F(2, 88) = 4.11, p = .020, \eta^2 = .09$]. A copy of the portfolio rubric is included at the end of this paper.

Satisfaction Survey

Survey responses were scaled from strongly agree (4) to strongly disagree (1). Average scores for each survey question are noted in Table 1. Questions 1-7 concerned satisfaction with the capstone course and feelings of efficacy. Questions 8-9 concerned satisfaction with the portfolio process itself. Students were generally very satisfied with the course and less satisfied with the portfolio. Anecdotal comments on the survey support this conclusion. Although not significantly so, students who expected to receive higher grades for the course indicated higher degrees of satisfaction and efficacy. A copy of the student survey is included at the end of this paper.

Conclusions

Our results appear to align with and add to the existing literature in terms of student satisfaction with capstone courses and plans for post baccalaureate graduation. Students planning on graduate school had higher grades for the course, clearer goal statements, generally higher scores on the ten program goals, higher average paper scores, and higher overall points for the portfolio; while those planning on employment had significantly higher scores on their resumes. Students taking the capstone in their last semester had significantly higher total points

earned for their portfolios than those completing the capstone course earlier. Students were generally very satisfied with the course and less satisfied with the portfolio. Students expecting to receive higher grades for the course indicated higher degrees of satisfaction and efficacy.

As a result of this study, we plan on continuing to offer and require students in our program to complete the capstone course. We plan on more stringent enforcement of the course prerequisites in order to promote students taking the course in their last terms. Students were very satisfied with the content and general nature (current issues and values) of the course and we will continue this focus. Two areas of concern arose that will be discussed in a focus group by faculty teaching the course. First, because of student (and some faculty) dissatisfaction, the portfolio requirements in the course will be reviewed and possibly revised. Second, because of the considerable number of high grades for the course, a possible issue of grade inflation will be discussed.

Table 1

Average Scores on Student Survey Questions

Survey Question:	<i>M</i>
This course helped me recognize and evaluate some of the psychological issues involved in social, developmental, and stress-evoking situations.	3.49
This course helped me recognize similarities and differences in customs, values, and expectations in various religious, ethnic, and racial groups.	3.25
This course helped me to be able to apply psychological theory I learned in courses to the analysis or understanding of social issues.	3.40
I felt I was able to explore and share my personal values, priorities, and experiences regarding various issues.	3.54
I felt alternative points of view and values were given respectful consideration.	3.49
I would consider myself better able to recognize issues that evoke closed-mindedness in myself and others.	3.44
I believe I can adequately identify and evaluate my own involvement in civic, social and global responsibilities.	3.33
Creating the integrative program portfolio with reflection of program goals was helpful and allowed me to assess how much I have learned in my degree program as well as areas I may still need to work on.	2.92
Creating the integrative program portfolio with plans to promote personal and professional/career development was helpful to my future.	2.97

References

- American Psychological Association. (2007). *APA Guidelines for the undergraduate psychology major*. Washington, DC; Author. Retrieved October 11, 2010, from http://www.apa.org/ed/psymajor_guideline.pdf
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- Dunn, D. S., Mehrotra, C. M., & Halonen, J. S. (eds.). (2004). *Measuring up: Educational assessment challenges and practices for psychology*. Washington, DC: APA.
- Halpern, D. F. (Ed.). (2009). *Undergraduate education in psychology: A blueprint for the future of the discipline*. Washington, DC: APA.
- Palomba, C. A., & Banta, T. W. (1999). *Assessment essentials: Planning, implementing, and improving assessment in higher education*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Pusateri, T., Halonen, J., Hill, B., & McCarthy, M. (2009). *The assessment cyberguide for learning goals and outcomes* (2nd ed.). Washington, DC: APA. Available at: <http://www.apa.org/ed/guidehomepage.html>
- Roscoe, L. J., & Strapp, C. M. (2009). Increasing psychology students' satisfaction with preparedness through a professional issues course. *Teaching of Psychology*, 36 (1), 18-23.

PSYC 546

Portfolio Rubric

Name: _____ ID: _____

I. Core Section:

Area	Component/Criteria	Point Value	Points Earned
Goal Statement	immediate and long-term career and life goals, including an explanation of why these goals are appropriate in terms of your knowledge, skills, characteristics, values, and experiences	5	
Program Goal Evaluations	Goal 1: Knowledge Base of Psychology	6	
	Goal 2: Research Methods in Psychology	6	
	Goal 3: Critical Thinking Skills in Psychology	6	
	Goal 4: Application of Psychology	6	
	Goal 5: Values in Psychology	6	
	Goal 6: Information and Technological Literacy	6	
	Goal 7: Communication Skills	6	
	Goal 8: Socio-cultural and International Awareness	6	
	Goal 9: Personal Development	6	
	Goal 10: Career Planning and Development	6	
Topic Paper	Corrections to graded Topic Paper for the course	5	

Program Goal Evaluations (10) each section should include an evaluation of how successfully you have acquired that goal of the psychology program, including: (1) a description of your strengths and weaknesses in each of the area, (2) an explanation of why you are strong and weak in the area, and (3) suggestions for the department to enable it to help future psychology majors develop these strengths and strengthen these weaknesses

II. Employment or Graduate School section

Employment		or		Graduate School		
Area	Points	Earned		Area	Points	Earned
BA job search results	4			Program search results	4	
Cover letter	4			Personal statement	4	
3 rec. forms	4			3 rec. forms	4	
Interviewing skills	4			Exam prep	4	
2 job app's	4			2 sample app's	4	

III. Current, accurate, and professional-appearing Resume (10 points) Resume Points: _____

COMMENTS:

TOTAL POINTS EARNED: _____ / 100

PSYC 546 Student Survey

Thank you for taking our newly revised PSYC 546 course. We are involved in a project assessing how well the revised course is meeting your own as well as the program’s goals and needs. Your input regarding our assessment would be invaluable in this effort. You may choose to complete the survey below and place it in the envelope provided for your convenience and anonymity. You can give the sealed envelope to your professor or you may send it to Dr. Johnson (G393) in the Psychology department directly by writing her name and room number on the envelope and dropping in any GSU local mailbox. Your name is not required on this survey and we will not be able to identify individual students in any way. Your grade for the course is not affected in any way by your completion of this survey or by your responses. If you feel any distress upon completion of this survey, you may contact Dr. Katherine Helm (708.235.7334) in the Academic Resource Center for free personal counseling.

Term: _____ Grade you expect to receive in this course: _____

Please indicate your responses to the following questions by placing an X in box that corresponds to your response. Responses range from **SA= Strongly Agree** to **SD = Strongly Disagree**

Question SD	SA	Agree	Disagree	SD
This course helped me recognize and evaluate some of the psychological issues involved in social, developmental, and stress-evoking situations.				
This course helped me recognize similarities and differences in customs, values, and expectations in various religious, ethnic, and racial groups.				
This course helped me to be able to apply psychological theory I learned in courses to the analysis or understanding of social issues.				
I felt I was able to explore and share my personal values, priorities, and experiences regarding various issues.				
I felt alternative points of view and values were given respectful consideration.				
I would consider myself better able to recognize issues that evoke closed-mindedness in myself and others.				
I believe I can adequately identify and evaluate my own involvement in civic, social and global responsibilities.				
Creating the integrative program portfolio with reflection of program goals was helpful and allowed me to assess how much I have learned in my degree program as well as areas I may still need to work on.				
Creating the integrative program portfolio with plans to promote personal and professional/career development was helpful to my future.				

Please indicate below or on the back of this page any additional comments you would like to make regarding this course and/or suggestions you have for improvement.