

Evaluation of the Human Services Capstone Portfolio Project



By the students of
HSP 485, Program Planning & Evaluation
Spring 2009
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Jn 2006, the Human Services Program moved to a curriculum designed to meet the Standards set forth by the Council for Standards in Human Service Education (CSHSE). During this revision, the decision was made to assess student learning through a capstone portfolio. While most human service programs in the US require students to complete a portfolio showing their accomplishments over the program, Western Washington University is unique in requiring a standards-based portfolio.¹ The portfolio is designed as a culminating benchmark assessment to evaluate students' mastery of the CSHSE Standards (see Appendix A for details of the Standards).

THE CAPSTONE PORTFOLIO PROCESS

During the program, students are required to take two courses related to the portfolio: HSP 304, Introduction to Portfolio Learning, and HSP 495, Capstone Portfolio. The first portfolio class, HSP 304, is required within the first five credits of the two year program. The course objective is to outline expectations for the capstone portfolio and offer an introduction to CSHSE standards. The final portfolio course, HSP 495, taken within the last five credits of the program, is designed to support students in compiling their final product. During HSP 495, students are asked to write essays for each Standard, describing how program coursework and field experience led to their mastery of the Standard. Essays on professional development, critical thinking, writing proficiency, technology, and information management are required. A statement of helping, a statement of purpose, and a self introduction are also included in the portfolio in order to provide professors and the

¹ *Thanks to Susan Kincaid and Jackie Baker-Sennett for background information and photos. Also thanks to Diana Jones for the photograph of the 2009 Portfolio Walk-A-Bout.*

audience with a sense of the students' individuality and professional values.

It was strongly encouraged in HSP 304 that students remember to look for linkages between future course work and CSHSE standards. Teachers included course-related Standards in each of their syllabi and identified assignments that could be used as evidence in the capstone portfolio. It was the responsibility of each student to update and manage their course work and portfolio evidence throughout the two year program. Upon the completion of HSP 495, students were asked to present and share their completed capstone portfolio with peers, future graduates, and professors.

EVALUATING THE CAPSTONE PORTFOLIO REQUIREMENT

During Spring quarter of 2009, Raine Dozier's Bellingham section of HSP 485, Human Services and Program Planning and Evaluation, chose to evaluate the capstone portfolio process for a final class project. Anecdotal evidence suggested that students were dissatisfied with the capstone process. This inspired the class to use course-related knowledge to complete a comprehensive evaluation of the capstone portfolio process. Students discussed methods for completing this project and determined that surveys, interviews and focus groups would provide a well-rounded evaluation of the capstone portfolio. Students participated in one of the data-collection groups based on their personal interests and strengths. One student was designated to be a liaison between the professor and students, as well as provide support in the write-up process. Over the course of four weeks, students created survey, focus group, and interview questions that would be used to gather data. Questions went through a writing and revision process including test questions on other class members. Each group was responsible for distributing surveys

and conducting interviews and focus groups before the final portfolio presentations. Information on study design and data compilation can be found in the following section.

SAMPLE & DATA INSTRUMENTS

The population of interest was students involved in the portfolio process and instructors of HSP 495, the final portfolio course. The sample for this evaluation included four HSP 495 instructors, one from Everett and three from Bellingham, and students from the three Bellingham senior core classes. Our survey and focus group sample is limited to Bellingham students.

Surveys

We created a survey that was administered to students in all senior core classes on the Bellingham campus (see Appendix B). In addition, the survey was replicated on Survey Monkey and the instructor in Everett encouraged her students to participate. Unfortunately, only one student responded during our data collection time frame thus we only evaluated student surveys from the Bellingham site. Since the off-campus sites have more adult learners and a different teaching style, it is possible that students' perceptions would differ between sites. Unfortunately, we were not able to analyze differences between sites. There were 48 surveys conducted in total.

The survey consisted of seven scaled questions, four agree/disagree questions and four open-ended questions that covered a variety of topics including different aspects of the process of creating the portfolio from start to finish, the Standards and teachers' conveyance of them, student preparation, and workload. The survey contained the three open-ended questions from the previous survey in Spring 2009 and the additional question, "Do you have any ideas of other ways to evaluate your mastery of the standards?" (See Appendix B).

Data was recorded in an Excel spreadsheet. Subject categories of common themes were developed for the open-ended questions, then responses were coded into thematic categories in an Excel format.

Focus Groups

Focus group questions were developed in order to explore general perceptions about the capstone portfolio process in more depth (see Appendix C). In addition, questions solicited suggestions for improvement. Two focus groups were scheduled and members were recruited from each core class. Three students from each of the three classes volunteered to participate in one of two focus groups, for a total of nine for each group. Five students attended the Wednesday group. Unfortunately, the second focus group was scheduled after the portfolio walk-a-about on Thursday and only two respondents attended. In total, seven students participated in the focus groups.

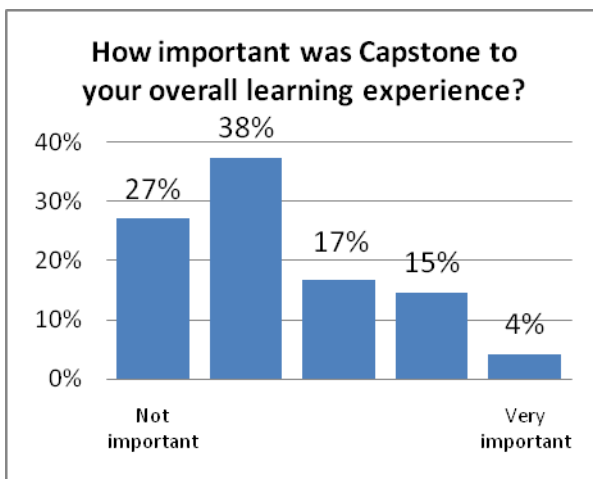
These focus groups were conducted with two recorders recording non-verbal cues and verbal dialogue as well as a facilitator who probed open-ended questions and dialogue. The focus groups were audio recorded and later transcribed. Researchers first developed thematic categories from the focus group questions, then responses were coded into thematic categories in an Excel format. The coded data was then summarized and direct quotes were used to emphasize students' points.

Interviews

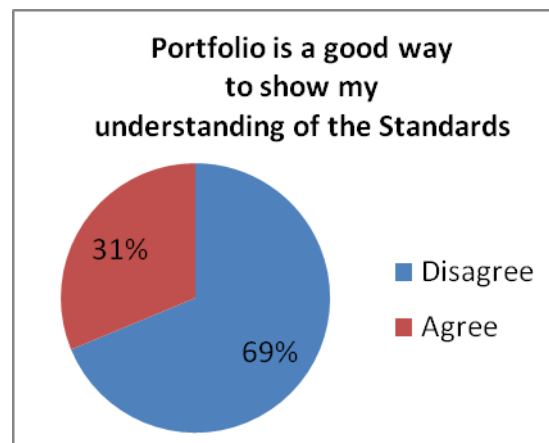
While all interviews with instructors were asked similar questions, two of the interviews had additional questions (see Appendix D). Jackie Baker-Sennett and Susan Kincaid were identified as being involved with the planning and creation of the courses and the portfolio process and were asked a few additional questions (see Appendix D). Interviewers summarized interviews with instructors during the interview process. Later, a group of students analyzed these notes for themes.

RESULTS

Beliefs and Attitudes About the Capstone Project



Graph 1



Graph 2

The survey data in Graph 1 indicate that approximately two thirds of participating students believed the capstone portfolio was not important to their overall learning experience. Students felt the portfolio process might have been more meaningful if it were spread out throughout the two-year program. According to Graph 1 above, only four percent of the students that participated in the survey thought that the capstone portfolio was important to their overall learning experience. Another survey question asked whether the portfolio was a good way to show their understanding of the Standards (see Graph 2). Students did see more direct benefit in illustrating their mastery of the Standards relative to contributing to their general learning experience. Still, only thirty percent believed that the portfolio was a good way to show their understanding of the Standards.

In response to the open-ended survey questions, students reported that the portfolio

process was largely unhelpful. Seventy percent reported that the portfolio process was unhelpful in some way, and half of those (35%)

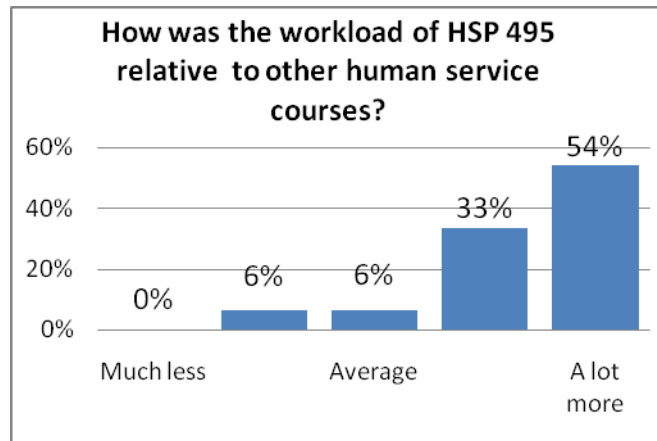
"It only helped me reminisce. It did not help me gain any other deeper understanding of the Standards or my learning."

said it was completely unhelpful. Approximately one quarter felt that it was a helpful and valuable process. Two students explicitly stated that other coursework suffered at the expense of the portfolio process; one student wrote, "My other course grade suffered because of the time it took to pull this information together." Graph 3 (below) indicates that students felt the

portfolio workload was a great burden. Almost all (87%) felt that the workload for HSP 495 was higher or much higher in relation to other human service courses.

Focus group participants also talked about the heavy workload in HSP 495. Participants

reported the stressfulness of the class and that the workload did not accurately represent the credits given. "I think the worst thing is that I missed out on other classes because I had to do portfolio."



Graph 3

Focus group participants generally expressed frustration with the process, saying that the writing felt redundant and did not necessarily contribute to their learning. Students believed that the portfolio process was helpful in the sense that it allowed them an opportunity to review their learning and make connections across courses. They also reported that the intensity of writing did not equate to the value of learning. They felt that it was somewhat redundant in that it was simply unnecessary duplicated reflection with too much time was spent writing and compiling the essays.

A majority of the participants in both focus groups felt the capstone portfolio class was repetitive, un-meaningful, and resembled unnecessary busy work. Despite the feeling it was time-consuming and required immense effort, participants enjoyed reminiscing and reflecting on the work during the program. For the majority, it instilled something meaningful to present upon graduation. To this end, many participants suggested restructuring the class so it progresses throughout the program, helping prepare students much more in advance for the

capstone class in order to prevent an immense workload for the final quarter in the program.

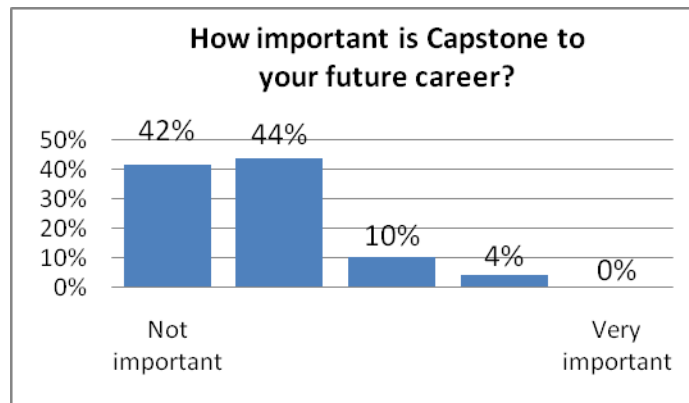
Many participants expressed an overall favorable experience with capstone and acknowledged the importance of having an overarching, reflective capstone project to complete the human services program.

However, these statements were followed by more negative judgments. Most expressed

"My other course grade suffered because of the time it took to pull this information together."

feelings of frustration and irritation at the portfolio project, and added it was incredibly repetitive. One participant said, "It's probably one of the most frustrating assignments I've been given in this program." They also highlighted the intensity of writing as a key issue with the portfolio, citing it as too much work and contributing to the repetitiveness of

the process. Three of the participants also disliked the emphasis on the Standards.



Graph 4

Graph 4 indicates that no students felt that portfolio would be very important to their future career and the great majority (86%) of students judged it as not important to their future career. Students from the focus groups believed that unless their future employers actually came from the Western Washington University Human Services Program, they would not fully understand the format of the capstone portfolio. One focus group participant captured this essence saying, "...unless they've come from the program, they're not going to understand the format." Participants who implied the capstone portfolio would contribute to their future career said the project allowed for self-awareness of strengths.

The following quotes highlight differing views of focus group participants:

"I think I might take bits of it to use, but to show my employer the whole thing, no way."

"I showed my portfolio with members from the community and many of them didn't know

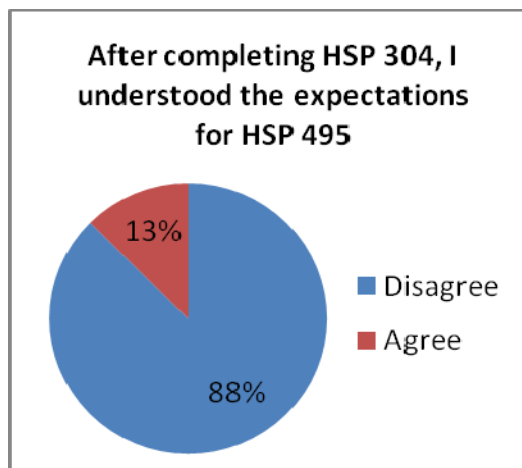
what it was. They didn't quite get it....I had to explain it to them. It'd be the same with an employer, they could read about the standards but I'll still have to explain it to them."

"I don't think there is enough structure in it to show what you actually did."

"I think I might take bits of it to use, but to show my employer the whole thing, no way."

The assumption made by the participants is the capstone portfolio's format is not relevant for organizations and/or community members outside the human services program. Participants favored a restructuring of the capstone portfolio making it more feasible and friendly for individuals outside the human services program.

Preparing for the Capstone Portfolio Project

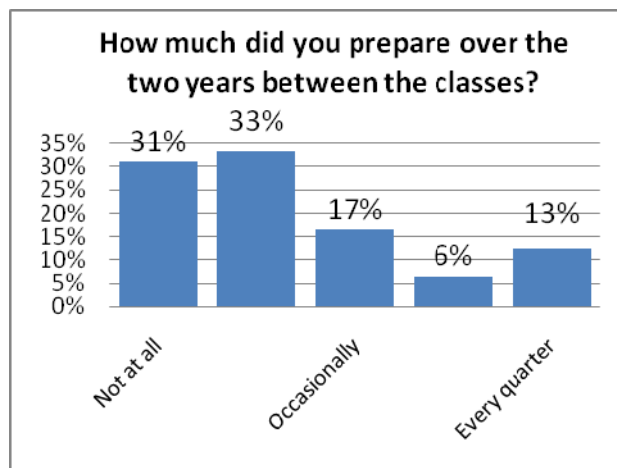


Graph 5

Upon entering the final capstone portfolio course, students generally felt unprepared. The course is offered in their final quarter when they are expected to finish their capstone portfolio. Most students did not feel that upon completion of their initial course (HSP 304), they clearly understood the task ahead. Graph 5 shows that almost all students (88 %) said that they did not understand the expectations for HSP 495 after completing HSP 304. In response to the open-ended questions, three quarters of students reported that HSP 304 was not valuable to their completion of the portfolio because, after completing HSP 304, they were still unsure of what to expect from HSP 495.

Focus group participants report that they did not understand the Standards well enough before the final course. They felt professors could have reviewed the Standards better in each class to demonstrate how they connected to the portfolio besides including them in their syllabus. “They have to write them in the syllabi.....but they need to get all the teachers on board to relate them to us.”

Almost two thirds of respondents prepared little or not at all for their portfolios over the



Graph 6

two years between HSP 304 and HSP 495 (see Graph 6). Focus group respondents support this claim. While each participant saved assignments either by computer or a file system, very few actually went beyond this. The majority of the participants felt they did not understand the portfolio enough to begin creating or preparing one. Even though each participant completed the initial portfolio class (HSP 304), participants felt it did not sufficiently explain the purpose and function of the portfolio. One participant said, “I wasn’t sure what the format was going to be for portfolio; I wasn’t sure how to organize it, by class or what.....We are never prepared or told how to organize these things.” The general opinion of

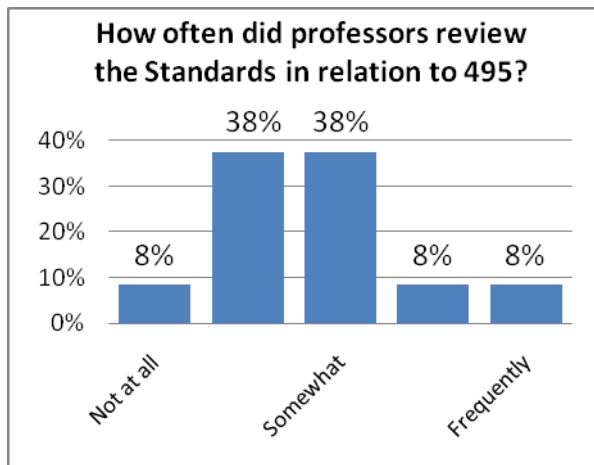
“I wasn’t sure what the format was going to be for portfolio; I wasn’t sure how to organize it, by class or what.....”

the focus group participants was that they did not leave HSP 304 with a clear understanding of how to develop a portfolio.

One of the survey's open-ended questions asked students how HSP 304 and HSP 495 courses were valuable or not so valuable in helping them complete their portfolio. Roughly three quarters of respondents found HSP 304 to be unhelpful in assisting them with the completion of their capstone portfolio. About half of the participants (47%) found HSP 495 to be helpful, mainly because of the opportunity it provided to receive peer and instructor feedback on the essays about the Standards. One student responded: "304 wasn't very helpful because we had just entered the program and didn't know what human services was, let alone the Standards. 495 was helpful

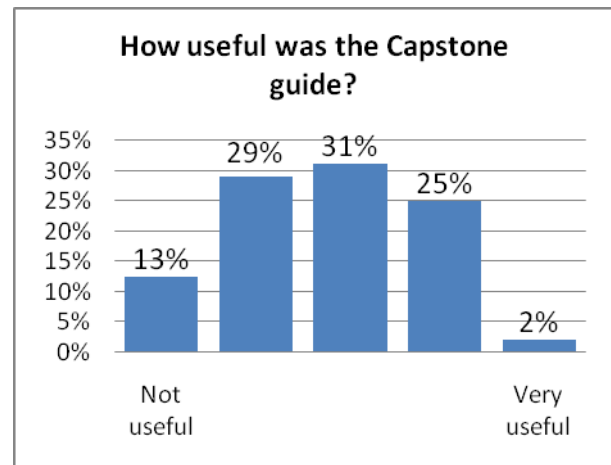
for editing, but not much else. The work in the course all needed to be completed individually so the class time felt unnecessary." Students also reported that the initial class was unhelpful because it did not provide enough information on the Standards. Overall, students were dissatisfied with HSP 304 because they did not have clear expectations from the course or the capstone assignment.

On a positive note, students did find the peer editing process used in HSP 495 useful in refining their essays.



Graph 7

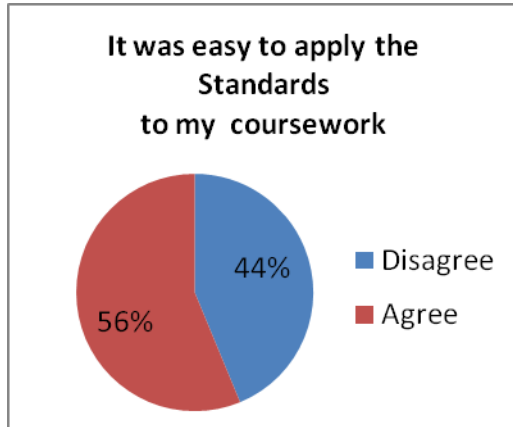
Students fared a bit better in seeking outside support for their portfolio process. They reported that over half of professors reviewed the Standards in relation to HSP 495 "somewhat" to "frequently" (see Graph 7) In addition to this, the capstone portfolio guide appeared to be somewhat useful with students



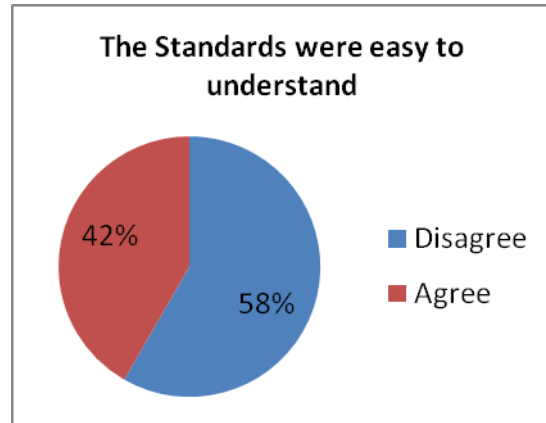
Graph 8

answers hovering in the middle of the five-point scale (see Graph 8). Generally, they found the guide somewhat useful. Overall, survey responses express a significant lack of preparation by students, HSP 304, and professors before students begin the capstone portfolio class in their final quarter.

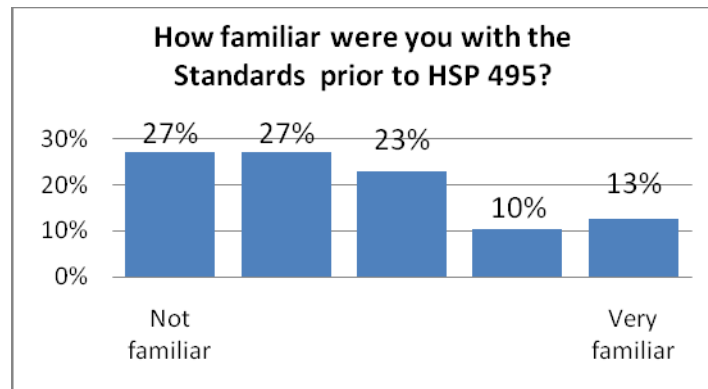
Knowledge of the Standards



Graph 9



Graph 10



Graph 11

More than half of the students questioned, said it was easy to apply the Standards to their coursework (see Graph 9). However, because of the wording of the question, it is not clear whether they found it easy to apply the Standards to their portfolio or simply saw the connections between the Standards and their

coursework more generally. The majority of the students reported that the Standards were difficult to understand and did not feel familiar to them until HSP 495 (see Graphs 10 & 11). Less than a quarter felt familiar or very familiar with the Standards prior to HSP 495.

Improving the Portfolio Process

In an open-ended survey question, students were asked for suggestions to improve the portfolio development process. Most people believed that, in order to improve the capstone process, the portfolio should be consistently worked on throughout the program. This could be accomplished by having another portfolio class or smaller classes across the final year of the program, having 304 in the middle of the program (closer to capstone), or by compiling the portfolio from previous work and essays during other classes. Two students write representative comments: “It should be a 2 credit class, all 3 quarters during senior year so it is constantly being built upon” and “Integrate strategy for incorporating standard discussion consistently throughout 2 years.”

Focus group respondents supported the idea of a working on the portfolio process throughout the length of the program. They agreed that it should not be left to the last quarter, and that it would be potentially more beneficial to write a paper at the end of each class expressing how that class met certain standards.

Another portion of students advocated for only using artifacts to prove mastery of the Standards or getting rid of the capstone process altogether and finding another way to assess the learning of the students. One student wrote “I’d like to be able to express my learning other than [through] writing.”

Another suggestion was to create a portfolio that could be used in career development rather than something useful just for evaluation by HSP faculty. A student commented, “More geared towards the personal growth of the student rather than the standard based.”

On an added note, focus group participants expressed anxiety that no one would show up to see their portfolios. They thought it would have been helpful to present them to juniors so

that they could understand the portfolio better before the class. “I think we should have to go into the junior class. I mean we had no seniors to come in. I think it would have been really good to spend the class or half the class with seniors in our core.”

“It should be a 2 credit class, all 3 quarters during senior year so it is constantly being built upon.”

Alternatives to Portfolio-Based Assessment

Students were asked for any ideas of other ways to evaluate their mastery of the Standards in an open-ended survey question. Five main themes that characterized their suggestions: a benchmark or test, a final project, passing the classes, having the Standards incorporated throughout the program, and only compiling artifacts. Forty-two participants responded and many had more than one theme in their response.

Overwhelmingly, the students suggested a different method of evaluating their completion of the program. The most common theme was that students felt that passing the classes and assignments was enough to support their own mastery of the Standards. One student wrote, “I think completion of the courses should be recognized as meeting the Standards. I understand the need for a final project in a way, but if the courses are building around the Standards then shouldn’t my grade signify that I met those requirements? I think we should be considering the Standards quarterly and have our final papers used as evidence of meeting the

outlined Standards.” Although many of the students appeared to be dissatisfied, one student wrote, “No, this is a creative way to express our learning as we see fit.”

“I think completion of the courses should be recognized as meeting the standards...if the courses are building around the standards then shouldn't my grade signify that I met those requirements?”

Focus group participants also supported the idea of alternative projects. “A lot of the stuff we do in this program is hypothetical so if people actually put something real out there it would be really cool.” All five of the respondents in the first focus group suggested a more meaningful project for the capstone assessment. Many expressed distaste for the writing intensive nature of the portfolio and seemed in agreement for a community project or something benefiting others and while being valuable to their learning. For example, one participant said, “It’s important to have something at the end of my experience here... I think there should be more flexibility in how we prove that we met the Standards.” Another participant mentioned students should be encouraged to study abroad and show their mastery of the Standards through a final project. This was met with many agreements from others in the group, despite the acknowledgment that its practicality is

“A lot of the stuff we do in this program is hypothetical so if people actually put something real out there, it would be really cool.”

questionable.

Perceptions of Teachers and Teacher-Planners

Overall, instructors believe the capstone process offers beneficial learning opportunities, but is in need of some changes. Several teachers believed it was important for students to engage in a deeper understanding of the Standards and spend more time reflecting on their overall learning in the program. They also stated that it is important to continually evaluate the capstone process and make changes as recommended by the students and faculty.

The three main themes, shared by most instructors, regarding the changes desired for the capstone portfolio process are regarding time, how to teach the class, and the need for more creative options. Instructors felt that the need to generate a portfolio within the seven week time constraint created a more impersonal, busy-work type of atmosphere. They suggested that improvements could be made by changing how the class is taught.

Several instructors mentioned that teaching capstone was awkward, and they struggled with the best way to cover the Standards in class or whether it was even necessary due to students’ constant exposure to the Standards throughout the program.

Although instructors clearly recognize the value of the capstone process, they seemed to want to offer students additional creative options to demonstrate their learning and mastery of the Standards. Two concrete suggestions were to allow students to demonstrate learning over the course of the two year program and to offer more than one constructivist approach or design for the capstone project. So far, capstone has been a much formalized process that insures a professional display of Standard

mastery, but the desire for changes indicates skepticism towards the portfolio's overall suitability for this task.

Professors involved in the planning of the project were asked how they decided that capstone was the best way to demonstrate learning. Generally, they believed that the capstone portfolio shows evidence of the curriculum being learned which in turn gives accreditation to the program. The accreditation allows students to receive more financial aid.

The capstone portfolio is seen as a non-traditional, constructivist way to integrate ideas that have been learned throughout the years, as opposed to more traditional positivist mid-terms or a final examination. It was also conveyed how a Standards- based portfolio can help students who are applying for graduate school and jobs within the human service profession to display an air of professionalism.

Instructors were also asked about other possible ways to demonstrate mastery of the Standards. Some expressed ideas expressed were to engage in a community involvement project or offer students the choice to produce evidence of standard mastery in their own way (e.g. create a documentary, produce a photo-essay or web matrix).

Finally, instructors were asked how they believe students perceive the capstone process. Instructors in Everett and Bellingham believed students had mixed perceptions about the process. In Bellingham, the instructors felt as though the students were not especially appreciative of the capstone process. The most common frustration professors have recognized is with the design of the capstone course (HS 495). The students viewed the portfolio process in this course as busy work; the ideas were redundant and it was too much work for a seven week period. Instructors believed that students recognized the value of the portfolio, but many saw it just as a hoop to jump through

and did not want to invest time in it. Bellingham teachers felt as though

In Everett, the instructor believed the students had a very different perception of the capstone process. The instructor stated although scared at the beginning of the course, their fears quickly diminished. In the end, her students find the process to be very interesting, and a good chance for reflection. She feels as though the capstone portfolio process is a celebration of accomplishment. Overall, professors believe that students are willing to acknowledge the value of bringing information together from various courses throughout the Human Service program, but are lacking enthusiasm during the progression.

Recommendations

After reviewing the feedback from the surveys, interviews and focus groups, we have a few recommendations to improve the capstone portfolio process. The recommendations fall into two categories: revising the capstone portfolio process and restructuring the evaluation process entirely.

Revisions

Among suggested revisions, many students felt that the HSP 495 course was too writing intensive. They left the writing and compilation of the portfolio until the final quarter of the program and became overwhelmed. Dispersing the work over the entire two years of the program would alleviate this problem. We recommend clearly reviewing the Standards and the applicable assignments that should be included in the portfolio at the end of each quarter. Another recommendation is to write some of the required essays during relevant courses. In addition, students did not seem to have a firm grasp of what the portfolio entails or how the Standards will relate to the portfolio before HSP 495. This should be clarified during HSP 304 and at other times during the two

years. By spreading the work throughout the two years, the stress and workload for students during the final quarter would be reduced.

Restructuring the Evaluation Process

If possible, we recommend changing the process of assessment entirely by using alternative methods. Students suggested a final benchmark exam, a community service project, or a creative project such as a

documentary/film or website. Another possible alternative assessment is to create a professional portfolio instead of a Standards-based capstone portfolio. This would allow students to reflect on their accomplishments while also preparing them to enter the profession by creating a tool to show potential employers.

APPENDIX A

The CHSHE Standards

Standard 11: The curriculum shall include the historical development of human services.

Standard 12: The curriculum shall include knowledge and theory of human systems, including individual, interpersonal, group, family, organizational, community, and societal and their interactions.

Standard 13: The curriculum shall address the conditions that promote or limit human functioning.

Standard 14: The curriculum shall provide knowledge and skill training in systematic analysis of service needs; selection of appropriate strategies, services, and interventions; and evaluation outcomes.

Standard 15: The curriculum shall provide knowledge and skills in information management.

Standard 16: the curriculum shall provide knowledge and skills in human services interventions that are appropriate to the level of education.

Standard 17: Learning experience shall be provided for the student to develop his or her interpersonal skills.

Standard 18: The curriculum shall provide knowledge, theory, and skills in the administrative aspects of the services delivery system.

Standard 19: The curriculum shall incorporate human services values and attitudes and promote understanding of human services ethics and their application in practice.

Standard 20: The program shall provide experiences and support to enable students to develop awareness of their own values, personalities, reaction patterns, interpersonal styles, and limitations.

Standard 21: The program shall provide field experience that is integrated with the curriculum.

Standard 22: The program shall award academic credit for the field experience.

Standard 23: It is the responsibility of the program to ensure that field placements provide quality supervised learning experiences.

**APPENDIX B
Capstone Survey**

Thank you for taking the time to complete our short survey. Your answers are anonymous and can in no way affect your grade.

1) How important do you feel the Capstone Portfolio is to your overall learning experience?

Not important				Very important
1	2	3	4	5

2) How important do you feel the Capstone Portfolio is to your future career?

Not important				Very important
1	2	3	4	5

3) How useful was the capstone guide in assisting your portfolio process in HSP 495?

Not useful				Very useful
1	2	3	4	5

4) How familiar were you with the Standards and their specifications prior to senior capstone portfolio class?

Not familiar				Very familiar
1	2	3	4	5

5) How would you rate the overall work load of HSP 495 in comparison to your other 4 credit human service courses?

Much less		Average		A lot more
1	2	3	4	5

6) How much did you prepare for your portfolio over the 2 years between the classes of HSP 304 and HSP 495?

Not at all		Occasionally		Every quarter
1	2	3	4	5

7) How often did the professors review the standards in relation to HSP 495?

Not at all

Somewhat

Frequently

1

2

3

4

5

Circle one answer for the following questions:

8) After completing HSP 304 (Intro to Portfolio) I understood the expectations for HSP 495 (Capstone).

Disagree

Agree

9) The standards were easy to understand.

Disagree

Agree

10) It was easy to apply the standards to my coursework

Disagree

Agree

11) Portfolio is a good way to show my understanding of the standards

Disagree

Agree

12) Do you have any ideas of other ways to evaluate your mastery of the standards?

13) How were the two portfolio courses, HSP 304 (Introduction to Portfolio Learning) and HSP 495 (Capstone Portfolio), valuable or not so valuable in helping you complete your portfolio?

14) How did the completion of your portfolio help (or not help) you pull your learning together over the course of 2+ years in the Human Services Program?

15) What suggestions do you have for improvement of the portfolio development process?

APPENDIX C
FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

1. Did the first portfolio class prepare you for the final capstone portfolio class?
2. What steps did you take throughout the program to prepare for capstone portfolio?
3. How did the capstone portfolio contribute to your learning?
4. Do you believe that the capstone portfolio will be useful to your future career?
5. If there must be an overarching assessment of your knowledge and learning of the CSHSE Standards, can you think of other ways of demonstrating your knowledge and learning of the standards?
6. Do you have anything else you would like to say about the capstone portfolio?

APPENDIX D
INSTRUCTOR AND INSTRUCTOR-PLANNER INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

For Teachers:

1. How do you feel your students are receiving the capstone process?
2. In your experience, what are the perceived challenges of portfolio for students?
3. Do you have a strong sense of the evaluation process?
4. Do you feel that a capstone evaluation is warranted at this time?
5. If you could change anything about the capstone process would you? What would it be?

Additional Questions for Planners:

1. What are your goals for students in this course?
2. Is it important for this program to exist for accreditation? How so in your opinion?
3. Do you feel that a capstone evaluation is warranted at this time?
4. If you could change anything about the capstone process would you? What would it be?