

The Capstone Experience in Geography

The Capstone Experience is required of all majors in geography at Western Oregon University. It serves different, but related, purposes for students and faculty.

For students, the Capstone Experience has three primary values. First, it gives structure and purpose to their programs of study. Not only is the major designed to provide students with the tools they need for a successful Capstone Experience, but each student's specific experience will be shaped by their chosen concentration within the major at Western Oregon. Second, by asking students to reflect on their entire program of study, the Capstone Experience is an opportunity to simultaneously focus and synthesize what they have learned. Finally, it will help students to become more articulate about their major and what it has meant to them. This last value will be of particular use as students pursue opportunities for employment and graduate study.

For faculty, the Capstone Experience is a means to assess student learning from the major as a whole, rather than on a course-by-course basis. As a common, shared experience for both faculty and students, the Capstone is also a tool for building a community of scholars within the department.

Capstone Options

As evidenced by the three concentrations within the major – Physical Environment, Urban & International, Culture & Politics - the geography faculty at Western hold interests and areas of specialization that range across the natural sciences, the social sciences, and the humanities. Students who choose to major in geography may be drawn to radically different dimensions of the field, and with a variety of career plans in mind. In order to accommodate the diverse interests and disciplinary preparations of both faculty and students, the Capstone Experience is flexible and adaptable. It may be based on one or more of the following:

- A research thesis.
- An original creative work.
- An internship.
- A professional portfolio.

Students should consult with their major advisor early in their Junior year regarding the planning of their Capstone Experience. Preparations will vary depending on a student's chosen concentration, skills, and future plans.

The Common Framework

While individual student experiences will vary, all Capstone Experiences in geography share the following:

1. GEOG 495 History and Philosophy of Geography. This course is a prerequisite for enrollment in GEOG 499 Capstone Experience. It is designed to initiate a student's overview of their program of study by focusing attention on the intellectual development of the field and those concepts that have come to define geography as a formal academic discipline. The coursework for GEOG 495 will incorporate specific steps towards fulfilling the Capstone Experience, and may include: required consultations with a student's major advisor, outlining preliminary work to be completed in advance of enrolling in GEOG 499, and drafting a proposal for the Capstone Experience. GEOG 495 will normally be offered in the Spring of each academic year.
2. GEOG 499 Capstone Experience. Typically, students will enroll in GEOG 499 in the Fall of the year in which they intend to graduate. The content of GEOG 499 will come from the capstone plan that a student has worked out with their major advisor. While the heart of the capstone is meant to be completed while enrolled in GEOG 499, a student may also arrange to earn credit for preparations and/or revisions related to the Capstone Experience.
3. Summation. The Capstone Experience is meant to allow faculty and students to assess learning from the major as a whole. As such, all Capstone Experiences will ask students to reflect on and draw from their entire program of study. Students will be asked to make connections between different courses and requirements, while demonstrating a higher level of proficiency in their chosen concentration.
4. Assessment of departmental learning outcomes. As with the major itself, the Capstone Experience is grounded in the department's learning outcomes, which specify that majors should:
 - Become conversant in geographic thought and practice.
 - Understand the role of geography in society.
 - Develop a clear understanding of the nature and significance of human-environment relations.

Every Capstone Experience will entail assessment of these outcomes, but within the context of each student's program of study. The different concentrations within the major accent different outcomes, and provide students with distinct vantage points on each theme. Each student's Capstone Experience will reflect these distinctions within the field and their programs of study at Western Oregon.

The Capstone and the Academic Excellence Showcase

Each year, students who successfully complete their Capstone Experience will have the opportunity to present their work at the Academic Excellence Showcase (AES) held in May. Students will be encouraged to revise and expand on their work and may arrange to earn course credit for their AES preparations.

The Capstone Experience in Geography

Thesis option

A thesis is a paper or essay based on original research. For the Capstone in geography, students should design a research project that addresses a question with relevance to their area of concentration within the major: Culture & Politics, Urban & International, or Physical Environment. The project should demonstrate a student's ability to think and act independently to apply what they have learned during their course of study in geography. There are three primary stages to the thesis: the proposal, field research, and research report.

I. The proposal.

The thesis proposal should include:

- Identification of a research topic or question and an explanation of its relevance to the student's area of concentration.
- An overview of current research related to that question, and an explanation of how the project will contribute to that body of work.
- A research design, that is, a plan and methodology for answering the question.

Students will write their proposal in consultation with their advisor. Once their advisor has approved their proposal, a student can continue to the next stage of work. A student's advisor may bring in a second reader to evaluate the merits of a proposal.

II. Field research.

Following approval of their proposal, and under the supervision of their advisor, students will begin their original research. Where and how students conduct their research will be worked out as part of their research design.

III. Research report.

After leaving the field, students will present their findings in a research report. Typically, this will take the form of a paper, but other options, such as posters or lectures, may be allowed, contingent on consent of their advisor.

The major components of the written report are:

- An abstract.
- An introduction with a thesis statement.

- Background on the topic, including the review of current research from the proposal, revised as needed.
- An explanation of and critical reflection on the research design and its effectiveness.
- A summary of findings.

Normally, students will write their research report while enrolled in GEOG 499: Capstone Experience. Their grade for that course will reflect their advisor's assessment of the completed thesis. The advisor will make their assessment with input and perspective from at least one additional reader. The recruitment of additional readers will depend on the joint judgment of advisor and student as to what kind of expertise or perspective is needed to assess the project. However, a student's final grade in GEOG 499 will be the sole responsibility of their advisor.

The Capstone Experience in Geography

Original creative work option

The original creative work option allows students to address or explore their geographic interests through artistic and other expressive forms, which may include, but are not limited to: photography, film, video, or other visual media, creative writing, and performance. Students should design a project that addresses themes or questions of relevance to their area of concentration within the major: Culture & Politics, Urban & International, or Physical Environment. The project should demonstrate a student's ability to think and act independently to apply what they have learned during their course of study in geography.

Typically, there will be three stages to the original creative work: the proposal, creation, and presentation.

I. The proposal.

The proposal should include:

- Identification of themes or questions to be addressed and an explanation of their relevance to the student's area of concentration.
- An explanation of what form the student's work will take, and an explanation of how that form will enable them to address their chosen themes or questions.
- A discussion of how their project will make a contribution to geographic knowledge and understanding.
- A plan for presentation of their work.

Students will write their proposal in consultation with their advisor. Once their advisor has approved their proposal, a student can continue to the next stage of work. A student's advisor may bring in a second reader to evaluate the merits of a proposal.

II. Creation.

Following approval of their proposal, and under the supervision of their advisor, students may begin their primary creative work. Typically students will be enrolled in GEOG 499 while engaged in this stage of their project. A student's grade in that course will be based on their advisor's assessment of the success of the work, but that assessment will not be made until after completion of the presentation stage.

III. Presentation.

Generally, presentation should follow the plan outlined and approved in the proposal. However, changes can be made as needed and with the consent of a student's advisor. The nature of a project's presentation will vary according to the form of the work, available and appropriate means, and student interests.

In assessing the completed work, advisors will consult with at least one additional reviewer. The recruitment of additional reviewers will depend on the nature of the work, and the joint judgment of advisor and student as to what kind of expertise or perspective is needed to assess the project. However, a student's final grade in GEOG 499 will be the sole responsibility of their advisor.

The Capstone Experience in Geography

Internship option

For this route to completing the Capstone requirement in geography, students could initiate and complete a project that is relevant to their areas of concentration within the major: Culture & Politics; Urban & International; Physical Environment.

As with other options within the Capstone, the project should be a demonstration of the student's ability to think and act independently, and, more importantly, to apply the knowledge gained in a "real world" situation.

This internship-based Capstone project will be significantly different from the Practicum (GEOG 409) that students may complete for course credits. The most significant difference between the two is that a Practicum provides the student with an opportunity to understand career opportunities related to Geography, and the expectation is that the student will carry out tasks assigned by the supervisor at work. In such situations, students rarely get to work on a single project from the planning stages all the way to completion.

However, when it comes to completing the Capstone through an internship, the student will be an active—preferably, the lead—participant in the project, from the beginning to the end. This higher level of expectations is comparable with those expected of students who choose the thesis or creative work options as Capstone work.

While faculty will assist students in gaining internships, we need to keep in mind various logistical issues that could arise, such as: no openings for the term when a student plans to do an internship, or the lack of a supervisor at the agency where the student proposes to work on the project, etc. This means that students might benefit from planning ahead, and not taking for granted a Capstone-internship during the final term before graduation.

Students need to complete the following steps and get the faculty adviser's approval before commencing the internship work:

- Statement of the research problem
- Compilation of the relevant and necessary background materials
 - Comparable to the "literature review" in thesis work
- List of tasks to be completed, and the schedule for those tasks
- Possible agencies where such a project can be completed
- Names and contact information for personnel at the agencies who could potentially serve as supervisors for the project

Once the internship commences, students need to meet with their advisers on a regular basis, and provide them with draft versions of the deliverables, which will be the products of each of the tasks. When all the work has been completed, students will submit the materials in the following order:

- Title page

- Name
 - WOU V#
 - Email address (WOU address preferred)
 - Telephone number
- Table of Contents
- A current résumé
- A copy of the report, and all the relevant appendices.

The Capstone Experience in Geography

Portfolio option

In this route to completing the Capstone requirement in geography, students could assemble a portfolio of their educational experience, and highlight within that their areas of concentration within the major: Culture & Politics; Urban & International; Physical Environment.

As with other options within the Capstone, the project should be a demonstration of (a) the student's ability to think and act independently; and, (b) their competencies when it comes to applying the knowledge gained in the "real world."

The students' education in geography is the primary focus of this portfolio, even while acknowledging the importance of other courses that students would have taken—in particular, the general education (LACC) and the minor. Through coursework, the faculty expect students to have achieved the following learning outcomes:

- Develop a thorough understanding of current trends in geographic thought and practice.
- Understand the role of geography in society.
- Develop a clear understanding of the nature and significance of human-environment relations.

The Portfolio is an option for students to demonstrate that they have indeed realized these learning outcomes. By providing relevant evidence, students demonstrate having achieved the learning outcomes that, in a way, automatically "qualifies" them as geographers. Such an approach to demonstrating competencies requires a reflective approach from students, and the resulting work—the Portfolio—will provide the needed evidence to the faculty, and to any interested personnel.

Putting together an overview of one's work towards fulfilling the requirements of the geography major will be a multi-stage process. The following are the procedural guidelines to students choosing this Capstone option:

1. Develop a one-page list of all the courses (with grades, and the instructor's name) you took towards your geography major. If you used transfer courses in your major, include those as well, but clearly identify them as transfer courses. Include in the overview the following information:
 - a. Terms/years at WOU
 - b. Terms/years at other colleges and universities
 - c. Terms/years of study abroad, if applicable
 - d. Average weekly hours of employment while enrolled at WOU, by academic term
 - e. Listing of your jobs in the summers while you were a student at WOU

2. A reflective essay, about 1,200-words in length, on how this mix of coursework, employment while enrolled in school, summer employment, and study abroad, has added value since graduating from high school.
3. Find as many of your old papers and tests as possible that you completed for the “major” courses on the list in the overview.
 - a. Select from these four examples that are demonstrative of realizing the department’s Learning Outcomes.
 - b. In a reflective essay, about 1,200-words in length, describe how these examples meet the Learning Outcomes.
4. The Geography major has a structure that has core courses, which all students are required to complete, and electives that students are free to choose from courses in geography and in other subjects.
 - a. In an essay, about 1,200-words in length, and with a few examples of your work—old papers and tests—write a reflective essay comparing and contrasting your learning experiences in the core versus the elective courses.
 - i. Among other things, we would like to know the content knowledge do you feel strongest/weakest in, and the courses that you took that have prepared you for “the real world”, and in what ways.
5. Finally, in about 1,200 words, provide an assessment of your overall experiences in the Geography Department at WOU. Among other things, we would like to know:
 - a. Which courses made the greatest difference in your thinking, your cultural or global awareness, or other personal-growth areas, and how?
 - b. What pedagogical practices have most contributed to your development as a geographer?
 - c. What changes in the major or the department (requirements, advising, course offerings, etc.) might have been beneficial to you personally?*Complete these without naming specific professors, or critiquing their work.*
6. As a demonstration of your abilities to critically think and write about geographic topics, write a paper, about 2,500-words in length, on a real-world problem that is of absolute interest to you.
 - a. Present your paper proposal to your adviser, and begin to work on the paper only after obtaining the adviser's approval.
 - b. Write the paper in a format that is typically required in senior-level courses, and refer to a minimum of eight authoritative sources.

Compiling the portfolio

Throughout the process, you will meet with your adviser on a regular basis, and provide the faculty with draft versions of the deliverables mentioned in the previous section.

When all the work has been completed, submit the final portfolio in a letter-sized binder, and include the materials in the following order:

- Title page
 - Name
 - WOU V#
 - Email address (WOU address preferred)
 - Telephone number
- Table of Contents
- A current résumé
- All the Portfolio components listed in the previous section.

Note: When including tests and essays, retain the originals with you, and include in the Portfolio only copies of those examples.