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Capstone Project Overview

*capstone* (kap-stohn), noun.
1. a finishing stone of a structure.
2. the crowning achievement, point, element, or event.

The “capstone” of the Master of Urban and Regional Planning degree at the University of Colorado Denver represents the culmination of what the student has learned during the MURP program. A MURP Capstone is a *real-world, client-based planning project*. Completing a unique, self-directed project gives students the opportunity to demonstrate the skills and knowledge they have gained, integrate and synthesize what they have learned, and pursue their individual passions. Working with a real client enables students to apply their creativity and problem-solving abilities in a real-world context and demonstrate their professional competencies to both the faculty and potential employers.

Students work with a client organization or agency to complete a project that is of significance and practical use to the organization. By the end of the Capstone semester, the student will produce a professional-quality project deliverable that addresses the client’s needs and conforms to the MURP program’s expectations for quality graduate-level work.

A Capstone project is not merely a narrow technical exercise, nor a lofty theoretical undertaking. Rather, the project should reflect knowledge of relevant literature, exhibit urban planning competencies, demonstrate an awareness of potential impacts on multiple constituencies, and address the formulation of policy goals. It should be an in-depth project that is useful for the client, but narrow enough that it can be completed in a single 15-week semester.

Capstone projects are all unique, but each is expected to be a high-quality professional project, complete with excellent writing, accurate documentation of sources, and effective presentation of data. Through the course of the semester, the student will submit two drafts of the project and meet with their Capstone course instructor for feedback. The quality of the Capstone project will be evaluated by the course instructor and the client. Successful completion of a Capstone project (or Master’s Thesis) is a requirement for graduation from the University of Colorado Denver Master of Urban and Regional Planning program.
Capstone Requirements

Below is an outline of the steps that students should follow in order to complete their Capstone project requirement. (More information about each of these follows.)

Note that items 1-4 are completed BEFORE the start of the semester in which the student registers for the Capstone course.

To complete the Capstone, students must:

1. **Attend the Capstone orientation session.** All students are required to participate in the Capstone orientation session before they enroll in the course. The orientation prepares students to identify and propose a project and client, and to develop a project prospectus in preparation for the beginning of the course.

2. **Register for the 6-credit Capstone course, URPL 6900.** Planning Project Studio (URPL 6000) is the official prerequisite for this course, but it is strongly recommended that students complete all core courses prior to the Capstone semester. Most students enroll in the Capstone during their final spring semester.

3. **Identify a Capstone client and project.**
   A. Seek out a client using your own professional network. Clients may work in various levels of government, private firms, or non-profit/community-based organizations. Contact the client and work with them to develop a project proposal that both meets their needs and relates to your area of professional interest. (See project parameters and project development strategies below). Complete and submit the Capstone Project Proposal form to the Capstone course instructor for approval by the deadline.
   OR
   B. Students should consult the Capstone web page for a list of client-proposed, faculty-approved Capstone projects. Students will review the available projects and select those that best match their professional skills and interests. **Students should complete and submit a Project Ballot by the deadline.** MURP faculty will match students and projects and will notify the students about the project for which they have been selected.
4. **Submit a formal Capstone Project Prospectus by the deadline.** If you do not have an approved project by the add/drop deadline for the semester, you will be required to drop the course. This may impact your graduation schedule!

5. **Submit a first draft of your project by the deadline.** Schedule a discussion session with your Capstone instructor. (Specific requirements for the first draft will be provided in the course syllabus.)

6. **Submit a full draft of your project deliverable by the deadline.** Schedule a discussion session with your Capstone instructor. (Specific requirements for the final draft will be provided in the course syllabus.)

7. **Complete and submit your Capstone project.** Submit the final project to your Capstone instructor by the deadline, formatted according to the specific instructions provided in the course syllabus. Submit the finished project to your client by the deadline.

8. **Receive an evaluation from your client.** The evaluation of your project will be turned in directly from your client to your Capstone instructor.

9. **Participate in the Capstone Poster Exhibition.** You will produce a poster that depicts your Capstone project and prepare a three- to five-minute presentation of your project. The posters will be displayed at an exhibition held near the end of the Capstone semester. Clients, other professionals, and the university community will be invited to the event. (Specific requirements for the poster will be provided in the course syllabus.)

10. **Submit a completed Capstone Exit Form** to the MURP Program.
Capstone Project Parameters

A Capstone project should:
- be related to urban and/or regional planning;
- have a clearly defined issue or problem to be addressed;
- be of significance and practical use to the client organization or agency;
- have clear expectations for final deliverables
- be of sufficient scope and magnitude to challenge the student’s skills;
- be achievable during a 15-week semester, with the student devoting approximately 12-15 hours a week to it;
- be supported by a specific individual at the client organization, who will be available to answer the student’s questions, review a draft of the project, make necessary information available to the student, and provide a final evaluation of the student’s work;
- not be conducted as part of the student’s ongoing work responsibilities; and
- not be conducted for financial compensation.

The Capstone “deliverable” may be a report, a plan or plans, drawings, models and/or other professional quality work appropriate to the project. The final Capstone project will include the specific deliverable(s) requested by the client, as well as documentation of research, etc. as appropriate to the project and specified in the Capstone Project Guidelines.

In addition to the final project, you will produce a poster documenting your project. The posters will be presented during an event at the end of the semester.

Finally, your Capstone course grade will also include an evaluation of your project by your client and your Capstone course instructor, as well as a self-assessment.
Choosing a Capstone Project

Students should start thinking about their Capstone project when they enter the MURP program. First-year MURP students can begin preparing for the Capstone by exploring possible projects in the following ways:

- Ask second-year students about the Capstone;
- Discuss possible projects with faculty members;
- Attend the Capstone poster event at the end of the spring semester;
- Use the summer between the first and second years of the MURP program to meet with potential clients;
- Explore the possibility of expanding a summer internship project into a Capstone.

There are two general routes for choosing a capstone project:

1. **Find a client you want to work with and develop a project for them.**
   Students may approach an organization and work with them to determine a project or identify a problem they would like the student to address. Planning professionals and faculty members can be good sources of insight into meaningful and relevant problems that can serve as Capstone project topics. If the project is of sufficient scope, a small team of students may work on it; each student must contribute a unique piece of the larger project. Complete a Capstone Project Proposal form (either the individual or team project form) and submit it by the deadline.

2. **Choose a client-proposed project from the Capstone webpage.**
   Throughout the year, potential Capstone clients are invited to submit proposals for Capstone projects they are interested in having students work on. Once reviewed and approved by faculty, these proposals are posted for students’ review on the Capstone webpage. Students will vote on their preferred client-proposed projects. Faculty will review the ballots and will match each student to the project that best suits their interests and skills. (Ideally, every student will be matched with their first-choice project.)

No matter which route is taken, all students are encouraged to find a Capstone topic that suits their interests and will allow them to produce a project that demonstrates their skills and professional competencies.
Project Proposal - Individual

Complete and submit the Individual Project Proposal pdf form.

The information you will need to provide on the form includes:

I. Client Information
   • Client contact name and title
   • Client organization name, address and website
   • Client email and phone
   • Briefly describe your client’s organization (and/or department) including mission, scope of work, key program activities and target population.

II. Capstone Project Description
   • Proposed project title
   • Subject areas that are relevant to your proposed project
   • Provide a brief overview of the issue or problem to be addressed by your Capstone project.
   • Describe why this issue is of particular relevance to your client’s organization at this time, and the practical implications of this issue or problem.
   • Describe the activities/ tasks you plan to undertake to complete this project.
   • Describe what deliverables you will provide to your client at the completion of the project.

III. Challenges
Describe the challenges you expect to face while completing this project. For example,
   • Do you anticipate any obstacles such as incomplete or inaccessible data, or community resistance?
   • Will you need to visit multiple or remote locations?
   • Will you need to gain or improve technical skills to complete the project?
   • Are you concerned about time management or maintaining the project’s scope?
Project Proposal - Team

In some circumstances, a project is of sufficient enough scope to be completed by a small team of students. Each student must contribute a unique piece of the larger project and the division of labor must be clearly identified. Complete and submit the Team Project Proposal pdf form.

The information you will need to provide on the form includes:

I. Team information
   • Name and email for each team member

II. Client Information
   • Client contact name and title
   • Client organization name, address and website
   • Client email and phone
   • Briefly describe your client’s organization (and/or department) including mission, scope of work, key program activities and target population.

III. Capstone Project Description
   • Proposed Project Title
   • Subject areas that are relevant to your proposed project
   • Provide a brief overview of the issue to be addressed by your Capstone project.
   • Describe why this issue is of particular relevance to your client’s organization at this time, and the practical implications of this issue or problem.
   • Why does this project warrant being undertaken by a team of students, rather than an individual student?
   • Describe the activities/tasks that each team member plans to undertake to complete this project.
   • Describe the deliverables that each team member will provide to your client at the completion of the project.

IV. Challenges
Describe the challenges you expect to face while completing this project. For example,
   • Do you anticipate any obstacles such as incomplete or inaccessible data, or community resistance?
   • Will you need to visit multiple or remote locations?
   • Will you need to gain or improve technical skills to complete the project?
   • Are you concerned about time management or maintaining the project’s scope?
**Project Prospectus**

Once you have worked with your client to define and clarify your Capstone project—whether the project was client-proposed or student-developed—you are ready to write and submit a formal prospectus for the project. The prospectus re-states some of the information provided in the project proposal, but adds important details that demonstrate your clear understanding of the issue you will be addressing, the way you will carry out the project, and the timeline you will follow for completing it. The prospectus provides your Capstone course instructor with the information they need to advise you on completing your project, so the time you invest in writing a comprehensive, detailed and thoughtful prospectus will lead to a more efficient, productive and successful project.

You will submit the prospectus via Canvas. It is due NO LATER than the second class of the Capstone course (January 29, 2015). Your instructor will review your prospectus and you will meet with them in person to discuss the project. Changes to your prospectus may be required by the instructor before they will approve it.

Clear, professional writing and complete, properly formatted citations and references are expected in the prospectus. It should be 6-8 pages in length (double-spaced, plus references and cover sheet) and should provide the following information:

1. **Cover Sheet:**
   - Project Title
   - Student Name(s)
   - Client Organization
   - Date

2. **Introduction/ Background/ Problem Statement**
   - brief description of client and context
   - a clear statement of the problem/ issue the capstone will address

3. **Goals/Objectives**
   - A statement of the purpose of the Capstone project
   - Describe the anticipated results/ desired outcomes of the project
   - Describe how the project will be useful to your client
   - Describe the significance of your project for planning practice and/or policy
4. Proposed Approach
   • Describe the specific methods you will use to complete your project. Include your process for collecting and analyzing information, and which techniques or tools you will use and why (e.g., review of research on the problem; case studies of other similar projects or policies; survey of residents; GIS techniques, etc.). If this is a team project, describe the unique contribution of each team member.

5. Data Sources
   • Include a preliminary reference list of sources you intend to incorporate in the report, including scholarly research, technical reports, online data sources, etc. Be as clear and detailed as possible.
   • If you will be collecting your own data, explain how (e.g., interview questions, survey, etc.).

6. Literature Review
   • Provide a brief summary of three to five sources related to your topic. These might include cutting-edge research, best practices, theory, or other types of information that help inform your approach to your project.

7. Final Deliverables
   • Describe the final deliverables you intend to produce. Note that the Capstone project is intended to be a product (e.g., a report or plan) rather than a process (e.g., community organizing, running a planning process, holding an event). If this is a team project, describe what each team member will produce.

8. Subject Matter Expert
   • Identify at least one Subject Matter Expert you intend to consult during your project. (This should be a faculty member or professional who has expertise in the content area and/or methodology of your project)

9. Professional Goals
   • Describe how the project relates to your professional and personal development goals. If you are a dual degree student, describe how the project integrates both disciplines. If this is a team project, provide this information for each team member.

10. Schedule
    • Provide a detailed work plan with a timeline of activities necessary to complete the project. Be specific: identify weekly tasks, and include official due dates for drafts,
final project, and presentation. If this is a team project, include deadlines for each team member’s activities and be sure to include adequate time for compiling the work as needed.

Consider including in your proposed timeline:
- Literature review
- COMIRB approval (if needed)
- Data collection (surveys, interviews, observations, focus groups)
- Data analysis
- Draft 1
- Review and Revisions
- Client check-in
- Draft 2
- Review and Revisions
- Client check-in
- Poster
- Final Deliverable Submission
- Self-Assessment
- Client Evaluation
Working with the Client

Here are some suggestions for meeting and working with a Capstone client.

1. **Call potential clients** and ask if they have a project that you can conduct for them for completion of your master’s degree. **Give them some examples**: collecting and analyzing data through surveys or interviews, reviewing existing land-use regulations, developing a strategic plan for addressing a particular issue, developing a local hazard mitigation plan, analyzing accessibility, using GIS to analyze certain conditions, evaluate affordable housing resources, etc. **Tell your client of the due dates for completing the Capstone; please verify the specific due dates with your course syllabus.** Ask if you could come in to talk to them or if they would like to think about it and offer to call them back in a couple of days.

2. Once you meet with them, **ask them to tell you more about the problem they would like you to address. Let them talk more than you do!** Ask them questions about the problem. Why did they think this project would be useful? What do they and others in the organization hope to accomplish with the project? What is the history of the issue? Which personnel are involved in the issue? Ask if they have some written materials (proposals, annual reports, research reports, etc.) that tell more about this issue. Ask if there are others in the organization that you should meet with to learn more about the issue.

3. If you think this is the project for you, **close the meeting by letting them know you will be doing some library research on the issue and developing a plan** (in addition to reading the materials they gave you and possibly contact and interviewing others for their thoughts). **Remind them of your timeline** for the work and due dates.

4. If you are unsure about this project and want to talk to other clients, **let them know you’re exploring several projects** and will get back to them. If you decide not to choose them, do get back to them with a phone call thanking them for the meeting and letting them know you have decided to take another project. (Remember, this may be an organization where you’d like to interview for a job in the future. **Do get back to them.**)

5. If you decide to pursue their project, you will probably want to **meet with the client again**, particularly if they have provided materials for you to read and you’ve learned more about the issue. Often, the first meeting does not provide sufficient information for you to understand the client’s needs and proceed with writing the project proposal. You may need to follow that meeting by reading the client’s materials as well as those from online sources, looking through your course materials for ideas on the issue, finding and reading scholarly articles, and/or
talking to MURP faculty. You may meet with the client in person to finalize details with them, or you may do this through a phone call or an e-mail. But, leave the door open to contact them again if you have questions before finalizing the prospectus. That is, understanding the magnitude and scope of the project can be an iterative process.

6. Do not impose your ideas for a project on the client. A good consultant listens well to learn the problems the client has. Once you have learned more about the organization, reviewed the scholarly literature on the topic, and collected information on the problem, you will offer advice and recommendations, but your role is not to select the problem to be studied.

7. You may or may not meet with them again to discuss issues, but you will certainly meet with them again after you've written the prospectus to get their reaction to the prospectus, suggested tasks, time-lines, etc.

8. After that meeting, you will meet with them periodically (or communicate by phone or e-mail) to keep them posted on progress. Your client is the person to help you with access to others in the organization and, possibly, resources in the community.

9. Finally, as you begin to get results, you will want to share these with your client, even before you have things written in a formal manner. Let them know what you're finding so that the drafts are not a total surprise. Then, get their feedback on the drafts.

10. Always behave like a professional. Dress appropriately. Be on time. Be polite. Listen carefully. Attempt to be neutral, yet help the client reach their goals.

Note: Occasionally, though rarely, a conflict arises if the client does not recognize that the project has to serve his/her goals, as well as the MURP program’s goals of assessing the knowledge and skills you have obtained in the program. So, your Capstone course instructor may ask you to “tweak” the project in ways that allow us to evaluate your academic performance as well as meet your client’s needs. We must make sure the project is sufficiently scholarly for a MURP graduate to show their skills and make sure it is feasible to conduct in the time frame allotted.

Talk to the instructor promptly if you experience challenges working for your client!
Roles and Expectations

The capstone is completed under a committee consisting of two persons: the capstone course instructor and a client. These two individuals will help you plan and carry out your project, and they will evaluate the quality of your work. The capstone course instructor and the client both must approve the project prospectus.

Students are encouraged to also seek out a subject-matter expert (or experts) to consult during the completion of the project. This individual(s) can help you answer technical questions associated with your project, and can ultimately help you expand your professional network.

It is the student’s responsibility to select a capstone topic and to secure a client for the project. The student is also responsible for ensuring completion of the report in a timely fashion and a satisfactory manner, and to communicate regularly with the capstone course instructor and the client.

1. The Course Instructor

The capstone course instructor will receive and comment on written drafts of the capstone project, and meet with each student individually at both prescribed meetings and on an as-needed basis. The instructor is there to help you be successful and help you achieve a professional quality final product. The course instructor determines your final grade in the course.

The instructor’s role is to guide the student in selecting a project and specifying its scope, to assist the student as needed in conducting the project, and to provide extensive feedback to the student on various drafts of the project. In order to provide students with the individual attention needed, capstone courses are restricted to no more than 20 students per class. Students may be moved to different sections to accommodate this class size requirement.

2. The Client

The client is the beneficiary of your project. The client establishes the parameters of the project and works with the student to clarify the project. The client should be able to provide the background information and access to resources, etc., as well as help the student identify appropriate research materials or contacts necessary to successfully complete your project. The client may provide feedback on drafts of your project. They will complete an evaluation of your final project, and their input will account for a
percentage of your capstone course grade. Additionally, the client will be invited to the capstone poster presentation event at the end of the semester.

Students conduct the projects "pro bono"; there is no cost to clients for having students conduct a project for their firm or agency.

In exceptional circumstances, where it is unreasonable to find an actual client, the professional project may be prepared for a hypothetical client under the supervision of at least two faculty members.

3. The Subject-Matter Expert
Students are encouraged to identify and meet with individuals who have expertise in the content area of the project. Students should consult with them early in the process to get recommendations for literature to review, data sources, project examples, etc.

You may ask your subject-matter expert questions about specific aspects of your project, and/or to comment on drafts of the project.

The subject matter expert will not officially evaluate your project and will not determine your course grade. All subject matter experts will be invited to attend the Capstone Poster Presentation Event at the end of the semester.
FAQs

What are the prerequisites for the Capstone course?
Officially, the only prerequisite for the Capstone course is Planning Project Studio (URPL 6000). However, it is strongly recommended that, at a minimum, students complete all core courses before taking the Capstone course. The Capstone course should be taken in the student’s last semester of classes before completing the MURP degree, though students are required to identify their client and topic prior to the beginning of that semester. Although students may take other courses at the same time as URPL 6900, they are strongly encouraged to limit additional coursework because of the work required for the Capstone.

Does the Capstone course meet every week?
No. Both sections will meet as a single class at the start of the semester and at a few other times during the semester. Canvas will used as a resource for students to share information with each other as needed between class meetings.

Can students do a group Capstone project?
A pair or small group of students may pursue a larger-scale capstone project in concert. In such instances, the project must be of sufficient scope to warrant multiple-student involvement, and each student must make a clearly identifiable, independent contribution. The team should complete and submit the Capstone Team Project Proposal form by the deadline.

What if I cannot complete my Capstone project by the end of the semester?
The capstone is intended to simulate a professional planning experience. Meeting deadlines and producing deliverables on time is a key aspect of professional practice. Students are expected to manage their time to meet these commitments. A grade of incomplete will only be issued under very exceptional circumstances.

Can I use my employer as a client?
If a student is involved in an internship or other part- or full-time planning employment, that work context might provide ideas for capstone topics. However, capstone projects may NOT be conducted as part of ongoing work responsibilities. That is, students may conduct a project for an organization that employs them but only if that project is outside of their official responsibilities.

Keep in mind that doing a Capstone project can give you the opportunity to address new problems and to work with additional professionals outside of your current employment situation—providing a significant opportunity to expand your professional network.
**Do I have to get Human Subjects Research approval for my capstone project?**
If your project includes collecting primary data about individuals, you may need to seek approval for your project from the Colorado Multiple Institutional Review Board (COMIRB). This process can be lengthy; consult with your course instructor early in the process. See the COMIRB website for more information: [http://www.ucdenver.edu/academics/research/AboutUs/comirb/Pages/comirb-home.aspx](http://www.ucdenver.edu/academics/research/AboutUs/comirb/Pages/comirb-home.aspx)

**Can I write a Master’s Thesis instead of doing a Capstone project?**
Yes. Completion of either a Capstone project or a Master’s Thesis is required for graduation from the MURP Program. A thesis is recommended for students who are interested in pursuing a doctoral degree or research career, and should only be pursued by those with a proven ability to do graduate-level academic research and writing. Note that writing a thesis involves asking a MURP faculty member to agree to be your committee chair, registering for a two-semester course sequence, assembling a review committee, and generally following the thesis guidelines of the University of Colorado Denver Graduate School.

**Who do I contact if I have further questions about the Capstone project and/or course?**
Students are encouraged to use all available personal, professional, and academic resources while they prepare for and complete their Capstone project.

If you have questions about the requirements for the project or the course, please contact the Capstone course instructors:

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