Working with a client and an organization can expose you to future work opportunities and allow you to see organizations in action, applying what you have learned in the MPA/MCJ program in a real world setting. Therefore, this type of final project, your capstone project, allows you to integrate and use many of the different skills you have gained in the MPA/MCJ program.

Your role with the client could be considered similar to being a consultant. You are not doing an internship with them. (An internship would involve working a specified number of hours at the organization and completing many different tasks.) Instead, you are learning about a problem the organization or client has and making recommendations to resolve it. Your tasks with the client include such tasks as 1) meet with the client to learn more about them and their needs; 2) possibly talk with others at the organization, attend meetings, read their reports or relevant internal documents; 3) search the scholarly literature for case studies, research or essays on similar programs or problems; 4) develop a plan for getting information; 4) collect it; 5) continue to consult with the client about what you are doing and what you are finding (within reason for the time frame); 6) write a report that addresses the client’s issue and present your results orally.

How do you find a client? First, get a list of potential clients and projects from the SPA website. Call the contact people whose projects look interesting to you. Meet with them to learn more about the project and the organization.

What if you don’t find anything on the list of interest to you? Find your own project! Since many, if not all, of you will be job hunting when the MPA/MCJ program ends, this is also a time for you to consider where you want to work and identify projects that will put you in contact with that organization or others like it. If you are searching for your own project, consider organizations you know – your children’s school, your city council, non-profits in your community, other small, public organizations where you may have a connection. Most of these organizations are pleased to have a person completing a master’s degree collect some information or provide some knowledgeable recommendations targeted for their use at no cost. Take advantage of your situation and contact people. Also, ask other faculty who work in your area of interest for recommendations of organizations or individuals to contact.

Remember it is critical to start early and get a project lined up right away. The semester moves quickly and failure to get through this first step quickly will make it challenging to complete the course.
Meeting with a Client

Here are some suggested steps:

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 or analyzing some data through surveys or interviews or using existing information, developing a management plan or strategic plan for a particular issue, developing a financial plan, analyzing current financial processes, analyzing a policy, assessing an organizational strategy, developing a training or recruitment program. Students have done some excellent projects interviewing people in other organizations, cities, or states that are known for exemplary work about the projects they have undertaken that are similar to those of your client. **Tell your client of the due dates for completing the Capstone:** for Spring semester, you want to plan to present your paper somewhere between the last week of April and first week of May; for Fall semester, you want to plan to present your paper somewhere between the last week of November and the first week of December. Please verify the specific dates, as well as other important 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 you call them back in a couple of days.

2. Once you get in to meet with them, **ask them to tell you more about the problem they would like you to address.** Let them talk more than you. Ask them questions about the problem. Why did they think this project would be useful? What do they 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, whatever) 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 a place where you later interview for a job. **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 you have read materials they provided and learned more about the issue. Often, the first meeting does not provide sufficient information for you to understand the client’s needs and proceed. You may need to go away, read materials, look through your old textbooks for ideas on the issue, do an internet search for scholarly articles (using
scholarly data bases available from the Auraria Library), and/or talk to SPA faculty, and then come back 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 SPA's goals of assessing the knowledge and skills you have obtained in the program. So, your primary reader 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 an MPA/MCJ graduate to show their skills and make sure it is feasible to conduct in the time frame allotted. You must talk to the instructor if you experience challenges working for your client.