



American Studies Program

SENIOR CAPSTONE EXPERIENCE

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A. Overview

The American Studies Senior Capstone culminates and integrates four years of rigorous academic preparation. The Capstone draws on knowledge, research, analysis, writing, and visual presentation skills that students have sharpened during their studies. It is an intensive research project guided by a faculty advisor, on a topic of the student’s choice. Its successful completion demonstrates not only the mastery of a discipline but the ability to write and think clearly.

Faculty advisors. All program faculty members may oversee Capstones. Students may request a particular faculty advisor, particularly if the faculty member’s expertise is pertinent to the student’s Capstone.

Grading. Students complete the Capstone while enrolled in the 4-credit Senior Capstone Experience (SCE) course in the spring of their senior year. The Capstone receives a mark of Pass, Fail, or Honors.

Double majors. Students pursuing double majors are encouraged to write integrated capstones for both majors. Since this requires consultation and cooperation between departments and faculty advisors, double majors should discuss the possibility of an integrated capstone in their junior year. (Two notes: (1) Not all departments permit double majors. (2) Double majors earn four SCE credits even if they write two capstones.)

B. Topics

Choose a Capstone topic that interests you. Better yet, choose a Capstone topic that you are passionate about! You will live with your topic for a long time. If it’s not something you care much about, you’re unlikely to invest the energy needed to achieve something special.

Beyond following your passion, how do you choose a good topic? Avoid choosing one that is too broad or too specific: but between the two, it's better to be narrow and specific rather than broad and general. There is a collection of old AMS Capstones at the C. V. Starr Center in the Custom House (as well as in Miller Library): browsing through these is an excellent way to begin thinking about your topic. Critical to selecting a Capstone is to sit down with your favorite professors and talk. Make sure you include a discussion of your post-graduate plans—after all, part of the purpose of the Capstone is to prepare you for life after Washington College. Choose professors and fields you like—even if they're not formally part of American Studies. At Washington College, students are encouraged to act entrepreneurially and take responsibility for their education. The American Studies Program strives to weave student interests and ideas into an individualized curriculum and Capstone—but this happens most effectively when the process begins early.

As your research proceeds, you may find that you have taken a direction quite different from the one you intended. It is important to discuss this with your advisor, either to get you back on track, or to make sure that this new direction is appropriate and achievable. Another common risk in the Capstone process is to realize, as you get further into your research, that your topic has grown to become unmanageable (too large, or too vague, or too hard to complete in the time available). To handle this, it is vital to talk with your advisor and make some decisions about how to proceed.

A completed Capstone is the visible part of an immense iceberg of wondering, research, thinking, editing, writing, and revising that took a lot of time and energy to build up. Especially in an interdisciplinary, individualized major like American Studies, you should begin preparing yourself for the Capstone well before your senior year. Develop careful note-taking and bibliographic skills (the Study Skills Center can help.) Keep track of ideas that occur to you over the course of your studies. Look for moments when something excites you or arouses your curiosity. Include out-of-class learning—lectures, study abroad, internships, career interests, discussions with faculty—in your Capstone thinking process. If you approach your Capstone with well-organized thoughts, good notes, and disciplined research and writing habits, you will be far more likely to produce a Capstone that will be of significant lasting value to you and your aspirations.

C. Format Guidelines

Capstones should have a minimum of four chapters, organized in the time-honored fashion (introduction, two or more content chapters, and conclusion):

- Chapter 1. Introduction
In the introduction you state your topic, explain your interest in it, and succinctly describe research methods. A literature review is customary, showing that you have done suitable preparatory research.
- Chapter 2
Your own research.

- Chapter 3
Your own research.
- Chapter 4. Conclusion
In the conclusion you summarize your research and thinking. Note strengths and acknowledge limitations. Place your work in context, and suggest the next step or future research directions.

The Capstone will also have front-matter (title page, abstract, Honor Code page, dedication, prefatory material, table of contents, table of figures) and back-matter (bibliography or list of works cited, appendices for supplementary material).

There is no official page requirement. Most Capstones are between 40 and 70 pages long. Length is not considered to be a substitute for quality. Capstones should be well written: concise, clear, accurate, and interesting.

Unless otherwise specified by the Capstone advisor, American Studies Capstones should follow either the format guidelines of the *Chicago Manual of Style* (CMS) or the Modern Language Association (MLA). CMS and MLA formats covers everything from title page to citations to guidelines for figures. Miller Library has complete manuals for CMS and MLA in its reference section.

D. Timeline

Because the American Studies major has a highly individualized curriculum, students are expected to begin thinking about their Capstone as early as possible. During the junior year, each American Studies major will meet with the Program Director, as well as other faculty, to discuss possible capstone topics and research plans. (Students are also encouraged to meet with the Director or other faculty even earlier than the junior year—this is especially important if the research plan includes internships, study-abroad, or other specialized research tracks.)

By the beginning of the senior year, each American Studies major must submit a well-researched proposal to the Program Director.

The timeline below presumes a four-chapter Capstone. But depending on the student, the topic, and the faculty advisor, some Capstones may have more than four chapters. In such cases, deadlines will be modified by the faculty advisor.

Junior Year

Spring	Discuss Capstones with department faculty; request specific faculty advisors. Meet with Program Director to declare Capstone topics and discuss research plans.
	Double-majors should discuss integrated capstones with their respective departments

Senior Year

September 1, 2006	Research proposal due to Program Director, showing proposed chapter breakdown and list of scholarly works. The list should be relatively extensive (perhaps 10 to 15 scholarly citations), and should indicate whether the item is physically owned by Miller Library, is accessible online, or must be ordered via interlibrary loan.
November 1, 2006	Chapter 1 due
February 1, 2007	Chapter 2 and revisions of ch. 1 due
March 1, 2007	Chapter 3 and revisions of ch. 2 due
April 2, 2007	Chapter 4 and abstract, and revisions of ch. 3
April 23, 2007	Completed polished final draft due (with title page, Honor Code signature page, dedication, table of contents, and table of figures, plus references and any appendices).

Capstones not meeting these deadlines will not be considered for Honors.

E. Pass and Fail

A designation of “Pass” is sufficient for graduation. A designation of “Fail” may be replaced by revision and resubmission of a senior capstone, with the approval of the faculty advisor.

F. Honors

If you are interested in pursuing Honors, please discuss this with your advisor at the beginning of the process. Honors Capstones are usually more ambitiously conceived than ordinary Capstones.

The Honors designation represents exceptional merit in a Capstone. Honors is recommended by the faculty advisor, and awarded by the program’s faculty as a whole. It means high quality in these areas:

- Conceptual understanding
- Research
- Analysis
- Writing
- Visual display of quantitative information
- Citations and references
- Additional materials as needed

Each year, from Senior Capstones receiving Honors, the most outstanding Capstone, as determined by program faculty, receives the American Studies Program Senior Capstone Award.

G. Sharing Capstone Learning

The Capstone is a work of scholarship meant to be shared. All American Studies capstones will be electronically published in Miller Library's holdings, accessible to the college community and to the public. The SCE senior seminar will include a session on electronic publication and submission of Capstones.

H. Style Tips

- Prefer the active voice to the passive voice
- Prefer “who-did-what” sentences to “there-was-a” sentences.
- Prefer active verbs to nominalizations (actions expressed as nouns):

Nominalization

There was a significant increase in the number of reality shows on the four major networks from 2003 to 2005.

Verb

The number of reality shows on the four major networks increased significantly from 2003 to 2005.

- Prefer short and strong words to big, mushy ones.
- Use lots of good, concrete examples: engage your reader's interest.
- The first person singular is acceptable.
- Generally keep numbers to one decimal place.
- Follow this number format: \$29 billion.
- Know the difference between dashes (–) and hyphens (-).
- Know how to cite and how to use terminal punctuation for quotations.
- Mechanical errors, typos, and sloppy proof-reading are not acceptable. They may be marked, but will not be corrected by faculty advisors.
- Consult Prof. Harvey's *Nuts and Bolts of College Writing* or another style guide for elaboration on these points.
- Consult Hacker for detailed information on CMS and MLA style.
- You are encouraged to use the college's Writing Center throughout the process of writing the Capstone.