# Civic Engagement in the Capstone: The "State of the Community" Event

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**ABSTRACT** Political science departments often require a senior-capstone course as part of the major. The Wahlke Report (1991) recommended including such a course more than 20 years ago, and the Association of American Colleges and Universities considers it a high-impact practice. Colleges and universities are also advocating broad efforts of civic engagement—an approach to academic work for which political science majors are uniquely qualified. This article describes the successes and failures of partnering a senior-capstone course with seven public agencies in a small city. By developing a multistage process for interacting with agencies, city officials, and the public, this "State of the Community" project provides students with a real-world opportunity to serve as political consultants. By emphasizing the importance of timeliness, teamwork, presentation skills, and professionalism, this project can be a turning point for political science students who must soon transition from students in the undergraduate world to citizens in the community.

One fall afternoon, the mayor and the assistant city manager of Chico approached me with an interesting proposition. They wanted to inaugurate an annual "State of the Community" event and they wondered how Chico State students could be involved. Both officials had professional connections to the university and saw the improvement in "town-gown" relationships as one benefit of such a partnership. Fortuitously, I was beginning the process of developing my senior-capstone syllabus for the spring and was looking for an appropriate civic engagement–professionalism component. This article describes the events and assignments that emerged and analyzes what worked well, what did not, and what might work for others in the future. I hope it will assist faculty in determining how to use the senior-capstone experience to help students transition from their role as political science majors to democratically engaged, working professionals in the political world.

## CAPSTONE AS STEPPING STONE

Political science departments across the country offer (and often require) a senior-capstone course as part of the major. The Wahlke Report recommended including such a course more than 20 years ago and the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) considers it a high-impact practice (Wahlke 1991). The capstone course is also seen as an effective means for fulfilling the increasing demands for programmatic assessment (Sum and Light 2010). Colleges and universities also are advocating broad efforts of civic engagement—an approach to academic work for which

political science majors are uniquely qualified. This article recommends a "State of the Community" project as a best practice for the capstone seminar. It describes the successes and failures of partnering a senior-capstone course with seven public agencies in a small city. By developing a multistage process for interacting with agencies, city officials, and the public, this project provides students with a real-world opportunity to serve as political and organizational consultants. By emphasizing the importance of timeliness, teamwork, community engagement, presentation skills, and professionalism, this project can be a turning point for political science students who must soon transition from the undergraduate world to citizens in the surrounding community.

For at least the past two decades, American educators and organizations have focused on how to better prepare college students for their role as engaged citizens (see, e.g., efforts by the American Democracy Project 2004, the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching [Colby et al. 2003], and the Pew Partnership for Civic Change [Ferraiolo 2004]). Moreover, engagement in the community is an increasingly important part of collegiate assessment and evaluation; the Carnegie Foundation now includes community engagement as an elective classification.[1] Political scientists, in particular, have encouraged the development of programs to address civic engagement and democratic engagement since the 1940s (Ishiyama, Bruening, and Lopez 2006, 662; McCartney, Bennion, and Simpson 2013). "Civic engagement" is defined in various ways, but Thomas Ehrlich provided a typical and useful definition: "Civic engagement means working to make a difference in the civic life of our communities and developing the combination of knowledge, skills, values, and motivation to make that difference. It means promoting the quality of life in a community, through

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both political and nonpolitical processes. A morally and civically responsible individual recognizes himself or herself as a member of a larger social fabric and therefore considers social problems to be at least partly his or her own" (2000, vi). The related concept of "civic literacy" is defined as "the ability of citizens to decide what government *should* be doing, understand what governments *are* doing, and have the skills required so that governments *will* respond appropriately" (Chesney and Feinstein 1997, 2; emphasis in original).

Political scientists face a special challenge in educating engaged citizens in that we often are expected to address this topic at both the basic level (suitable for general-education courses) and at a more advanced level (suitable for our majors). Previous research suggests that courses presenting local-government, civic-engagement, or community-based learning opportunities can be effective in helping students to better understand the roles of local governments and the duties of informed citizens (Jackman 2012; van Assendelft 2008). This article suggests that the senior-capstone course is an excellent point at which to emphasize the importance of civic engagement and civic literacy that is meaningful to our majors as they transition from the classroom to careers. Whether or not political science students begin careers directly related to their major, their chosen major suggests a civic interest that makes them valuable as potential community leaders in an era in which participation in civil-society organizations is declining (Putnam 2000). Indeed, experiential learning activities that require students to have meaningful confrontations and interactions with their communities can be crucial to the development of self-efficacy and civic responsibility (see, e.g., Bandura 1997).

Beyond the specific concept of civic engagement, the capstone also can more broadly prepare students for the noncollegiate world. Scholars note a need for students to acquire employment-related skills as undergraduates and the benefit of active learning strategies in developing those skills (Peters and Beeson 2010). A secondary benefit of the project described here is that it requires students to engage in tasks that they likely encounter in their career: writing formal and informal communication, evaluating programs, working on multiperson projects, scheduling meetings, giving public presentations, and dressing and speaking professionally. This career focus does not mean, of course, that a capstone course is or should be merely vocational; rather, a successful capstone grounds these practical skills in a substantive social science framework.

## ORGANIZATION OF THE PROJECT

This project began with an initial meeting between the author and city officials. The mayor and assistant city manager were interested in establishing events that would help the public to better understand the challenges faced by the community, help community agencies to better see their interdependencies, and provide a vantage point from which all of those involved could identify solutions to difficult problems. The assistant city manager served as the point of contact for the class, identified and secured participation from community partners, and designed the format for two "State of the Community" events. He identified seven government agencies (i.e., City of Chico, Butte County Board of Supervisors, Chico Unified School District, Chico State University, Butte County Community College, Chico Area Recreation District, and State Senate District 4) that were willing to participate in this project. We then agreed on a meeting format in which the community agencies would present the results of their self-assessments at a public meeting early in the spring semester; the capstone students would

present an action plan for each agency in a second forum toward the end of the semester.

We established a schedule in which each agency would provide the city and the students with a written strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) analysis[2] before the first forum and then present their issues at that meeting. To make it a public event, the city agreed to advertise the forum as a continued city council meeting. The capstone class attended the first forum to learn about the agencies' issues and to meet their agency liaisons.

As the course instructor, my role was to integrate this project into a senior-capstone course that is required of all general political science majors at my university.[3] The course enrollment is typically 20 to 30 students, which allowed for the creation of three- or four-member teams. I assigned the teams based on student interest as expressed in a questionnaire distributed on the first day of class. The course also had a number of assignments in addition to the "State of the Community" project. In the weeks prior to the first public forum meeting, students spent time outside of class getting to know one another, researching the role and structure of their assigned community partner, learning about a SWOT analysis, and developing questions for their agency liaison.

After the first forum—which was televised on a community-access channel and well attended by members of the community—the student teams faced a number of additional tasks. They were required to meet at least once with a liaison from their partner agency to discuss potential plans and ask additional questions. Because the assignment required students to develop action items that involved at least one other agency, we used class time to hold inter-team meetings.

Each team produced two written work products. The first was a SWOT Analysis Plan of Action, in which they summarized the key portions of their community partner's SWOT analysis and developed three to five action items for agency improvement. The action items analyzed how the agency could capitalize on its strengths and opportunities and/or address weaknesses and threats. These plans had to be feasible and legal but they did not all have to be implemented during the semester. After submitting this assignment, the teams were required to meet again with their community agencies, present their action plans, and decide—in collaboration with the agency—on one or more ideas for further development. The actual implementation of one of the ideas became the next part of the project. The action items that students chose to pursue included expanding an after-school mentoring program for the school district, developing outreach efforts on college campuses for the local recreation district, and creating an Internet discussion board for the City of Chico.

The second written product—a Community Report—was not due until after the second "State of the Community" forum. At that event, also held in the city council chamber, each team gave a 10-minute presentation that focused on the collaborative implementation of an action item with their community partner and that offered recommendations for the future. So that teams could incorporate feedback from their agencies, the written report was not due until one week after the forum.

For both written projects, we developed grading rubrics as a class. I started with a basic structure and asked the students to fill in the component parts of the assignment, relative weights, and examples of strong and weak elements.[4] Because this was an entirely new project for me, and because the availability and demands of the various community partners required adaptability on the part of the students, this was the most effective approach for a mutual

understanding of expectations. Feedback from students and community partners as well as my own reflections led to conclusions regarding the project's successes and failures.

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## BENEFITS AND SUCCESSES

In addition to the directly substantive portions of each team's written assignments, each student was required to write a one- to two-page reflection paper for both the SWOT Analysis Plan of Action and the Community Report. These reflections, along with class discussions and conversations with community partners, produced the following observations.[5]

On the positive side, I was impressed with the students' patience and professionalism. It has been my experience that college students often wear sweatpants to class, drink soda, and chat/text/sleep if they become disinterested. I presented this observation to the class before the first community forum, and I asked them how they thought they should dress and behave at the event. They had a thoughtful conversation about attire and attentiveness; as a result, every student attended both forums and dressed and behaved professionally. Afterward, several community leaders commented about this to me; they were particularly impressed by the students' oral presentations and use of PowerPoint at the second forum. Many of the student presentations were as good as if not better than those of the community partners. I am confident that the students learned an important lesson about professionalism.

A second benefit—and the most substantively important—was the opportunity to practice civic engagement. By employing the students in a "real-world" task as opposed to a classroom simulation, they had to think through how they might be involved in their community. Many students reflected on how this project would help them use the skills they were learning from their major coursework. One student noted that "taking the role of someone that actually has a say was a really cool experience." Another observed that "the greatest strength in this project is the fact that as students, it gives us a chance to actually work on something that can possibly have an impact on our community. This is in contrast to the past three years of merely doing assignments and projects out of a hypothetical context or simply in the realm of academia. By introducing us to a situation that is based in reality and not purely academic, with real consequences and rewards, it changed my whole outlook." All slights to academia aside, it is apparent from these comments that the project had the intended impact in regard to civic engagement.

A related benefit was the opportunity to practice communication skills in the public sphere. Because they knew that their oral and visual presentation would be shown before a live public audience and on local television, and because their community reports would be available to the public via the City of Chico's website, many students considered the assignment to be "higher stakes" than a typical course assignment. Therefore, many invested more time and effort in the project. As one student observed, presenting his work publicly "was probably one of the greatest experiences I have ever had in college. I truly felt like for the first time in college that I was actually doing something that carried with it some meaning."

Being able to address the community on something that we had worked so hard on, and [to] have such a warm response from the community, really made this whole project worth it."

Students were also led to think concretely about their own careers. By having the opportunity to interact directly with elected and appointed officials, as well as career public administrators, the students realized that these people are "regular folks" with obtainable careers. Many professionals in the region have degrees from Chico State, which influenced several students to consider a public-service career in a new light. Although students often pursue a degree in political science with the dream of becoming president (or at least a senator), a career in state or local government is more realistic for many. This activity provided a clear connection between the skills and concepts learned in the classroom and their application in the public sphere. A typical student reaction was that "this project has created a lasting image of what the professional world will be like."

Students also reported positive experiences with the team aspect of the project. Typical responses included "[I]t was nice to not have to worry about group members pulling their weight." My suspicion is that students often are assigned group projects in high school and early in college, when not all of those involved are prepared to take the assignment seriously or are not capable of contributing equally. Anticipating this grumbling, I included the following statement in the course syllabus:

> "Disclaimer: This is a team project. I know that some of you loathe, fear, etc. 'group projects.' The fact of the matter is that most careers require collaborative work from time to time. You don't always get to choose your team members, and sometimes you are evaluated based on the work of others, in addition to your own contributions."

I believe that confronting student fears up front, as well as including the project in a senior-capstone course for majors—wherein all those involved had the ability and incentive to contribute equally—added to the success of this element of the project.

In addition to the direct benefits that were an intentional part of the assignment, secondary and unplanned benefits emerged. For example, several students reported that the community forums allowed their family and friends to see them on television. This was a source of pride and they appreciated the opportunity to display their skills and to share with their families what they were learning in college. Many Chico State students are first-generation college students and have had difficulty in relating the importance of what they are doing in school to their parents. This is particularly true given the rapidly rising costs of higher education and the choice of a major the connection of which to the job market is not always immediately apparent.

Another secondary benefit was a better understanding of the interdependence among government agencies. The community partners frequently referred to their interactions with one another (e.g., conflicts between the city council and the state senator about

the elimination of redevelopment agencies). These conversations, in conjunction with the requirement that student teams meet to hear ideas and seek potential collaborations, helped students see the interconnectedness among public agencies. As one student observed: "[A]nother extremely productive step in this process was the forced

would be leaving the university by the end of May also limited some longer-term solutions that they might have pursued. Students were frustrated in that some problems they identified were too big to solve in the scope of the semester and that they would not see their ideas fully implemented. According to one student: "[E]ven though our group

> *"By introducing us to a situation that is based in reality and not purely academic, with real consequences and rewards, it changed my whole outlook."*

cooperation between groups. This truly allowed for a great exchange of ideas and helped identify some strengths and weaknesses in our own analysis of our agencies."

Finally, the project was an opportunity for enhancing relations between the community and the university. Chico is a typical college town in that the student population comprises a significant segment of the population (i.e., about 15%). The campus abuts the downtown area and students reside predominantly in mixed residential neighborhoods. These factors can lead to tension between the university and a community's permanent residents, so it was beneficial to have a positive connection reported in the local media. This student's comment stated it best: "[T]he recent community address that our class gave…showed our differing agencies that young people can come up with productive ideas that can potentially better our community."

### DIFFICULTIES AND CHALLENGES

Although this project was successful overall, it also experienced its share of challenges. The most significant was the inclusion of uncooperative community partners. Whereas representatives from all of the agencies attended both forums and agreed to meet with students at least once, one agency failed to submit a written SWOT analysis and two did not agree to meetings in a timely manner. Although dealing with difficult clients is a realistic learning experience, for one team in particular this led to increased stress and difficulty in meeting deadlines. One student observed: "[W]hile I feel my group ultimately did create a well-rounded concept, the fate of our work lies in the hands of officials who are either unwilling to attempt to implement our idea or incapable of doing so." My response was to be flexible about due dates and to consider these challenges in grading their report, but I think this made the project less positive for the most negatively affected team.

Another set of difficulties was related to the student composition of the class. Because the political science major at Chico State is flexible, students came into the capstone course with varying backgrounds in terms of coursework and interests; therefore, some were better prepared than others to serve as consultants. I attempted to compensate for this by allowing students to largely self-select their agency and by balancing team membership. Nevertheless, some teams came into the project better prepared than others. In addition, varying work and class schedules and commuting commitments resulted in intra-group frustrations.

Other difficulties affected the entire class. All of the students were graduating seniors, and the combination of a semester-long project and "senioritis" was frustrating at times. I ensured that this project would conclude by the end of April to minimize the effect of thinking beyond graduation; however, some students missed team meetings due to job interviews or other reasons. The fact that all of the students

would have loved to be able to…solve the City of Chico's budget problems, it was obvious that this was just too big of a task for us to tackle."

Finally, the project faced logistical challenges. Because I needed to rely on a partnership with city officials for certain aspects of the project, and because this was a new venture for both myself and the city, I devoted too much class time to the project early in the semester, before all aspects of the project including firm dates and expectations from the city had been confirmed. Although this was a good lesson in flexibility, it also caused stress and frustration that I wanted to avoid. As one student noted: "[T]he first few weeks of this project were kind of lost in an abyss of lack of understanding as to what was expected." There also has been a problem with follow-up. We embarked on the project with a goal to repeat the event every year and have annual follow-ups with community partners; however, a new mayor, a new assistant city manager, and the rotation of the course instructor have made that less likely to happen. As with other aspects of the project, it simply may be necessary to revise expectations and consider the "State of the Community" as a project to revisit every few years rather than annually.

### FUTURE RECOMMENDATIONS

The "State of the Community" project was successful and a high-impact, active learning practice that could be replicated by other capstone courses. To achieve the civic-engagement goals and ensure a positive experience for students, I recommend a few adjustments and considerations.

First, instructors interested in pursuing a similar project should work to their own strengths as well as those of their school and community. I teach state and local government. If another's field is comparative politics, the approach may be different—perhaps working with cultural organizations or immigration agencies. I also live in a community that is small enough to make this enterprise appealing to city and regional governments. I expect that communication and coordination obstacles increase with size and that a community of 100,000 people can engage in projects that might be almost impossible in a major metropolis. Class size, as well, must shape this project, although most capstone seminars are reasonably well suited for this type of endeavor.

This type of project will be more successful and welcomed by a community if more attention is focused on the needs of the community. For example, an agency may become "burned out" participating in this type of project every year; perhaps it should be pursued every two or three years. Or, if it is pursued annually, the agencies involved should be rotated. Having willing and eager community partners is vital. The project requires dedicated contacts so that the agency is accountable to both the community and the students. A letter from the mayor and a written commitment from the agencies, listing the designated liaisons, would help to ensure consistent participation.

Another way to ensure agency "buy-in" is to design the project so that it is mutually beneficial. Community partners must see a benefit to justify their participation; if they see their role as a true partner, they will actively participate rather than simply answer students' questions.

Potential problems can be preempted in the syllabus or through class discussion early in the semester. To ensure that students make a positive impression on the community, formal presentation skills and expectations should be explicitly addressed, possibly including a class rehearsal. The students' goal should be to impress public officials with their professionalism, not disappoint them with their informality. On a related note, having an assignment early in the course that requires teams to learn about their agency will increase their confidence when they first meet their partner—and the partner will be confident that the students are not wasting the agency's time. Having small teams of two to four students facilitates the scheduling of meetings and is realistic for future work situations. Going forward, I will create a sample SWOT analysis and plan of action for Week 1 or 2 so that students have a better sense of the project goals. It is also helpful to emphasize in the syllabus the importance of event attendance. I had the good fortune of an extra "special-project" unit attached to the course, which helped to enforce attendance at outside-of-class activities.

Some logistical considerations and coordination issues require attention. It is helpful for teams to meet with community partners *before* the first forum so that everyone understands what a SWOT analysis is and that the community agency can present information to the students in a helpful manner. Instructors should encourage students to be persistent in contacting agency liaisons and in sending drafts so that the students' efforts are evident. This may result in more timely responses and the partners taking the activity more seriously. It also is beneficial to make implementation a part of the Community Report by having a built-in follow-up component. This could continue into future semesters and provide new groups of students with a starting point for the activity. It also makes sense to develop publicity for the public forums. The city did a good job of advertising the first event but the second had lower attendance. Because this was the forum at which the students were presenting their work, it would have been good to have a packed room. Encouraging students from other classes, faculty, student and community journalists, and university officials to attend can generate broader coverage of the events.

Finally, and perhaps most important, for this project to be successful, flexibility is paramount. Agencies change their minds, administrators change their availability, and students need less time for some tasks and more for others. If an instructor is willing to remain flexible, the "State of the Community" project can contribute to an invaluable civic education for political science students.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

## NOTES

1. According to Carnegie (2013): "The purpose of community engagement is the partnership of college and university knowledge and resources with those of the public and private sectors to enrich scholarship, research, and creative activity; enhance curriculum, teaching and learning; prepare educated, engaged citizens; strengthen democratic values and civic responsibility; address critical societal issues; and contribute to the public good."

2. A SWOT analysis examines an organization's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. It is a standard tool for better understanding a public or private organization's needs.

3. The complete syllabus is available at www.csuchico.edu/~ccturner/syllabi/capstonespring12.html.

4. Both rubrics are linked in the syllabus. See note 3.

5. In retrospect, this evaluation could have been more systematic. In future iterations, I will employ pre- and post-treatment surveys to better capture changes in student knowledge, skills, and attitudes toward civic engagement.

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