

Capstone Experience: The Key to a Successful Agricultural Communications Program

Shelly Peper Sitton
Oklahoma State University

Introduction

Undergraduate students who major in agricultural communications complete courses from a variety of disciplines including areas outside of agriculture. At times, their courses may seem unconnected to each other and unrelated to their ultimate career goals. A capstone course is the best way to bring together the diverse pieces of an agricultural communications curriculum. Wagenaar (1993, p. 209) defined a capstone course as “a culminating experience in which students are expected to integrate, extend, critique, and apply the knowledge gained in the major.” The Association of American Colleges (as cited in Andreasen & Trede, 2000) recommends capstone courses for all academic disciplines. Crunkilton (as cited in Andreasen & Trede, 2000) identified five required learning activities and six educational outcomes for capstone courses. The activities included project and/or case studies, small group work, issues analysis, oral communication, and industry involvement. The outcomes included decision-making, critical thinking, collaborative/professional relationships, oral communications, written communications, and problem solving.

Implementation

At Oklahoma State University, the first section of an agricultural communications capstone course (AGCM 4413: Agricultural Communications Product Development) was taught in the Fall 1998 semester and has been taught during each fall and spring semester since that time. Average enrollment is approximately 13 students in the fall semesters and 18 students in the spring semesters. Students may take the course only once, and the vast majority of students will complete the course during their final semester on campus.

During the capstone course, students sell, design and lay out sponsorships; communicate with sponsors; search for, write, peer critique, and edit feature stories about students, faculty, and programs in the College of Agricultural Sciences and Natural Resources; design and create feature story layouts; work with high-resolution graphics; and interact with each other to solve problems and take advantage of opportunities. Each aspect involves firm deadlines for completion. Most semesters, the students have produced a 36-page magazine — the *Cowboy Journal* — with 12 full-color pages and 24 two-color pages. The printing costs (approximately \$6,000 per semester) are covered by sponsorship funds raised by the students through sponsorship sales. Quebecor World in Midland, Michigan, prints the publication using “computer-to-plate” technology; all files are transferred electronically from OSU to the Quebecor FTP site.

Results

The capstone experience offers students the opportunity to enhance the knowledge and skills they have acquired in previous classes. One of the strongest assets of the capstone course is the collaboration of students throughout the semester. They learn quickly that teamwork and cooperation are vital to the success of the entire project, just as those skills are necessary in the workplace. They also learn to draw from each other's strengths and help each other through weaker areas. While students can be overwhelmed by the intensity of a capstone course, the majority of students have responded positively when the course is completed.

Through exit interviews, students have indicated that the capstone course is the most useful course in the curriculum: "I can't imagine completing the agricultural communications curriculum without the magazine class. Capstone courses provide a fantastic, 'real world' finishing touch that pulls everything you've learned together" (S. Greenlee, personal communication, December 8, 1999). Nikki Coe (N. Coe, personal communication, November 14, 2000), co-editor for the Fall 2000 issue of the *Cowboy Journal*, indicated that the capstone class was a great way to use her skills and to produce a product that showcased those skills in an interview. In addition, the *Cowboy Journal* has received several honors from the National Agricultural Communicators of Tomorrow, including the Excellence in Publications awards and the first place magazine awards in 1999 and 2000.

Advice to Others

Agricultural communications programs should include a capstone experience in the major curriculum. As Wagenaar (1993, p. 214) has suggested, a capstone course "gives faculty members the opportunity to work with their majors as junior colleagues in the discipline." The benefits to students are concrete, but the departments and colleges benefit as well from the visibility of the final projects created during capstone experiences. The capstone course would not have to be a college magazine as the *Cowboy Journal* is. The course could focus on other media or use service-learning group projects of smaller proportions, but the experience in problem solving, written and oral communication, synthesis of curriculum, decision making, and critical thinking would remain the same. The capstone experience can be implemented regardless of the agricultural communications program's size.

Resources Needed

The resources needed to implement a capstone course vary depending on the type of project students will produce. In the case of a magazine, it would be best if the department had access to a computer laboratory (preferably with ZIP drives), access to central file-storage space, a high-resolution digital camera, Internet access, desktop-publishing software, and image-editing software.

References

Andreasen, R.J., and Trede, L.D. 2000. Perceived benefits of an agricultural capstone course at Iowa State University. NACTA Journal 44(1): 51-56.

Wagenaar, T.C. 1993. The capstone course. Teaching Sociology 21(3): 209-214.