

## SAMPLE PROJECT DESCRIPTIONS

### WASC Retreat on Student Learning and Assessment (Level II)

#### **SAMPLE #1: X University Project Sheet**

##### 1. Project: “Shaping Undergraduate Education via the Capstone Experience”

The capstone initiative is one of three themes X University proposed in December 2007 for its *Educational Effectiveness Review*. Work on this project officially began in Fall 2006 when a cross-disciplinary workgroup comprised of faculty and students was appointed to: 1) define the nature and function of capstones in a way that would be meaningful across campus, and 2) understand better how curricula might be designed to support capstones. The overarching, long-term goals of this initiative are to: improve available capstones, reshape major and minor curricula to better support the capstone, and expand capstone opportunities wisely, according to a well-defined standard. X University’s capstone theme is grounded in our conceptualization of capstones as sound curricular mechanisms for defining and evaluating learning outcomes as well as for measuring program success and, ultimately, facilitating educational improvement.

Our work thus far has been multifaceted, but has focused primarily on a group of 37 diverse undergraduate programs (~30% of X University’s majors) that have an existing capstone requirement. In preparation for certifying these programs as “Capstone Majors” we have sought—through departmental survey and through follow-up group and individual conversations with faculty and administrators—to fully characterize the nature of each capstone and to understand existing educational goals and assessment plans. The most challenging tasks we have faced thus far are helping faculty: (a) convert goals into “learning outcomes,” and (b) articulate their evaluation and curricular review processes that both well represent their existing practices and that are also largely standardized across academic disciplines.

To help ensure that capstones are well tended, and that they continue to play a significant role in the articulation and achievement of a program’s learning outcomes, we have also involved Senate leadership in the development of new guidelines for departments and programs with undergraduate majors.

Next steps within this initiative include continuing our study of the inaugural set of “Capstone Major” programs; working with a new set of departments that would like to establish capstone majors; incorporating the assessment of capstone experiences and learning outcomes during the Academic Senate Review; and incorporating capstone language in the X University General Catalog. Our long-range goal (toward 2015) is to establish capstone programs in all X University departments.

##### 2. Current State of Assessment Efforts:

On the whole, the current state of our capstone assessment efforts can be categorized as falling somewhere between “Initial” and “Emerging.” X University’s Senior Survey is one example of a campus-wide mechanism for collecting data about all aspects of students’ undergraduate experiences, including capstone experiences. Certainly, however, there is variation across academic units with respect to the sophistication of current departmental/programmatic assessment efforts as they relate to the capstone experience. This applies both to the nature of information that is gathered regularly and its systematic application to enhancing curricular development, student learning, and the like. In the months to come,

we will develop a better understanding of various departmental processes and work toward enhancing their efficiency and effectiveness, as applicable. Currently, we are still in the early stages of this work.

### 3. Promising Practices from Campus Experiences:

a. Viewing the accreditation process as a facilitative tool for curricular enhancement and positive change rather than as an activity to be simply endured. Since capstones typically draw broadly on, and bring into focus, the learning outcomes for academic programs, X University decided in Fall 2007 to align its capstone initiative with the articulation of programmatic learning outcomes (for WASC's Exhibit 7.1). Toward this end, we have made good progress in conceptualizing how that initially somewhat cryptic Exhibit can be used to help us inventory and summarize the broad range of capstone options at X University, as well as a tool to help faculty think systematically about curricular options within their undergraduate programs. In association with these efforts, we have also created materials that have proven to be useful to faculty as they develop their learning outcomes and articulate associated assessment plans.

b. Maintaining focus on progress rather than endpoints: Our work thus far with departments has proceeded well and, in many cases, better than expected, in part because we have been able to help colleagues understand that this is a long-term project in which there are no "good" or "bad" programs, simply different starting points and different types of work to be done. Throughout the early stages of this work, our emphasis on this initiative as a long-term process with many opportunities for measuring important progress has helped to create a more open mindset among many than might otherwise be the case. Not unexpectedly, we have encountered some wariness from faculty regarding the feasibility of establishing quality capstone experiences for undergraduates across academic disciplines and majors within an institutional context like X University and, in particular, within the midst of a difficult budgetary time. Indeed, we also have been working thus far mainly with departments that already have capstone experiences in place for at least some portion of their undergraduate majors (e.g., those majoring in particular programs within the department). Nonetheless, once we have been able to talk with faculty, share the origins and goals of this project, and engage them in thinking creatively about existing course options and how they may potentially be adapted, the general reaction has been very positive.

### 4. Areas for Desired Guidance:

My colleagues and I view participation in this retreat as valuable both in terms of learning about work that is ongoing on other campuses and in terms of sharing our ongoing capstone efforts. We are encouraged overall with the progress we have made thus far and look forward to expanding our work and knowledge. Toward that end, we would be interested to focus during this retreat, at least to some extent, on cross-disciplinary strategies for assessing learning outcomes, specifically within the context of the capstone experience. In addition, as we move toward working with departments/programs that have more limited capacity to offer capstones (including large departments that have experienced budget cuts and that anticipate additional cuts), we would be interested to discuss creative approaches to effecting programmatic change within differentially challenging contexts.

### **SAMPLE #2: Y Community College Project Sheet**

#### i. What is the project we would like to work on?

We have recently decided to include Teamwork and Collaboration under our Communication core competency. Now we need to devise a way to assess this aspect of communication.

ii. How would you describe the current state of assessment efforts relative to this project?

This is a brand new change in our assessment strategy. However, for the past five months, we have been working on a method to assess four aspects of communication (reading, writing, speaking, and listening) by using rubrics to analyze student course products. Some of these course products are done in groups.

iii. Brief description of two promising practices from your campus experience.

(1) Successful strategies for engaging faculty and other campus professionals in assessment:

When the Y Community College assessment committee decided to create a "home grown" critical thinking assessment tool, we got faculty buy-in by inviting faculty members to contribute items to a test bank, in return for a chance to win a trip to Catalina Island, a gift certificate to Borders, and the like. Faculty members had to designate which of the seven critical thinking skills that the item was supposed to assess. We ended up with nearly 200 critical thinking items, which we sorted through for the initial version of our critical thinking instrument.

(2) A specific assessment study, including description of data collection, data analysis, and the impact of the study:

The Y Community College Critical Thinking Inventory has been given to a sample of classes during the spring and fall 2008 semesters. The targeted classes either had a majority of incoming students, with fewer than 15 units or a majority of sophomores, with 45 or more units. In addition, students have been tracked individually by students ID number. There is indeed an increase in critical thinking ability in sophomore students as compared to freshmen.

iv. In which areas would your team like guidance?

We need assistance with data management.

Our college is in the process of looking at electronic data recording software. We see that it is imperative to have a somewhat uniform way to record/report the data from our various departments. Since all instructors report their grades online at the end of each semester, we would like them to input assessment data each semester.

Also, we have heard that some colleges have developed a "My Space" type of communication network, which benefits students, for example, letting them know whether their class has been canceled, but which could also be used to collect data. For example, a computer window could pop up saying, I notice that you want to sign up for a political science course. Before you can register, please go to web page ABC and complete a civic engagement survey.

We are also about to try our first attempt at using embedded student products as our assessment tools. We have created rubrics and have practiced using them, but haven't yet developed satisfactory inter-rater reliability.