



Translating Classroom Learning to the Real World:

An Assessment of Ag
Comm Capstone
Students' Career
Readiness
(as part of a curriculum renovation)

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AESC at UNL – Renovation efforts

- Historically, small enrollment program (> 20 students)
 - 1 full-time, tenure-track faculty member
 - Capstone offered every other year
- Today, we've “beefed up” – since 2011:
 - Three full-time, tenure-track faculty; 1 non-tenure track and two part time faculty (equivalent 4.5 FTE)
 - Added 5 courses, ~30+ students
- Ch-ch-ch-changes...
 - Capstone required a dedicated project to demonstrate ACE 10 outcome for the major:
 - Generate a creative or scholarly product that requires broad knowledge, appropriate technical proficiency, information collection, synthesis, interpretation, presentation, and reflection
 - Integration of communication services professional staff



Strategic Discussions for Nebraska



- **Publication goal**
 - To explain research conducted IANR, and across UNL, about topics of importance to Nebraska for understanding by a general audience



The Assessment

- **Purpose**
 - To gauge **student perceptions** and **assess their performance** in this newly restructured capstone course
 - ACE 10 certified course; assessment required by CASNR
- **Components**
 - Students' self assessment through reflection
 - Instructors' assessment of communication skills
 - Instructors' assessment of professional preparation
- **Course format**
 - 1 three hour lecture period each week
 - 1 50 minute seminar period each week



Student Self Assessment – 5 Reflections

- Reflection 1
 - Positive perceptions of early class activities relating to interviewing and working with sources
 - Professionalism was seen as a key component
- Reflection 2
 - Some indication from students that course activities enhanced or took advantage of their professional strengths
 - But some seemed to be frustrated not to be able to do more
- Reflection 3
 - Students reported internships were the most valuable tools in building their networking skills



Student Self Assessment

- Reflection 4
 - Students commented about their abilities to work with others and handle multiple projects and tasks with effective communication
- Reflection 5
 - Students described overall experiences in the course and in the program
 - “Once I was able to dive in and understand the different specialties within my area of emphasis...I loved it”
 - Expressed frustration:
 - Not to be able to use skills they were best at, most interested in
 - To have to fit magazine, long-form publication writing style



Instructors' Assessment of Communication Skills

Table 1. *Instructors' ratings of student competencies for interviewing, writing and editing, and media production skills*

	<i>N</i>	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	<i>SD</i>
Interviewing					
Planning and scheduling interviews	4	50.00	65.00	60.00	7.07
Developing interview questions	3	19.00	60.00	34.67	22.14
Engaging sources	4	40.00	93.00	76.00	24.54
Maintaining an appropriate demeanor	4	75.00	93.00	84.25	8.62
Note-taking	0				
Writing and editing					
Background research	3	20.00	40.00	30.00	10.00
Writing for diverse audiences and media	3	0.00	20.00	11.00	10.15
Grammar, punctuation, and spelling	3	19.00	66.00	35.00	26.85
Accuracy and appropriate detail	3	12.00	75.00	35.67	34.30
Using Associated Press style	3	20.00	66.00	38.33	24.38



Instructors' Assessment of Communication Skills

- **Interview assessment**
 - Skills included ability to plan and schedule interviews; develop interview questions; engage with sources; maintain and appropriate demeanor
- Good at interacting with interview sources
- Abilities to construct meaningful questions were somewhat lacking
 - “I believe the students were too unprepared, regardless, to engage the sources...”
- Areas for improvement:
 - Question writing
 - Interview preparation



Instructors' Assessment of Communication Skills

- **Writing and editing**
 - Skills included background research; writing for diverse audiences and media; GSP; accuracy and appropriate detail; using AP style
- Unable to adjust writing style to suit diverse audience needs or understand why they needed to
- Lack of mastery of writing skills;
 - Not all students had taken journalistic writing courses
- Lack of critical thinking skills
 - Awareness of mistakes
 - Inability to see the broader implications of the scientists' work
 - Inability to understand direct implications of their own work



Instructors' Assessment of Professional Preparation

Table 2. *Instructors' assessment of student competencies in professional skills and behavior*

	<i>N</i>	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	<i>SD</i>
Professionalism					
Punctuality and attendance; preparedness; appropriate dress and manner	4	20.00	70.00	53.75	22.87
Ethical decision-making					
Understanding of journalism ethics; ability to make conscious decisions regarding story content	3	20.00	81.00	47.00	31.10
Teamwork					
Willingness and ability to work cooperatively; respect for colleagues and instructors	3	30.00	64.00	48.00	17.09



Instructors' Recommendations for Program Improvement

- Increased emphasis on writing throughout program
 - Newswriting is foundational and must be required
 - Completion of writing courses with a minimum B grade
- Possibly a two-semester capstone course
 - First semester writing preparation focus
 - Second semester production focus
- Rectify disparity between course goals and AESC curriculum
 - Ongoing since 2011-2012
- Efforts to improve communication skills overall
 - Interpersonal communication
 - Professional correspondence



Overall Recommendations

- Familiarize students with capstone expectations long before enrollment
- Consider spreading course over two semesters
 - Relieve student and instructor stress and workload
 - Facilitate inclusion of student interests and skills in course
- Increase course enrollment
- Changes to AESC program curriculum
 - Require newswriting and editing (with minimum grade)
 - Potential exam (GSP)
- Broad implementation of activities and assignments to support goal of high quality performance in capstone
 - Work with internship supervisors specifically



Questions, comments, queements?



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