Translating Classroom Learning to the Real World:

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

Karen J. Cannon, Ph.D.
University of Nebraska-Lincoln

and

Annie R. Specht, Ph.D.
Ohio State University
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 move to...
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

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

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