

Making College “Worth It” – Season 1, Episode 4

Capitalizing on Capstone Experiences

Nolan Schultheis (00:05):

Welcome to Making College Worth It, the show that examines engaged learning activities that increase the value of college experiences.

Jessie Moore (00:11):

In each episode, we share research from Elon University Center for Engaged Learning and our international network of scholars. We explore engaged learning activities that recent college graduates associate with their financial and time commitment to college being worthwhile.

Nolan Schultheis (00:25):

I'm Nolan Schultheis, a first year student at Elon University, studying psychology with an interest in law. I'm the Center for Engaged Learning's Podcast producer and a legal profession scholar.

Jessie Moore (00:34):

And I'm Jessie Moore, director of Elon Center for Engaged Learning and a professor of professional writing and rhetoric.

Nolan Schultheis (00:39):

In this episode, we'll focus on capstone experiences, which can include a variety of culminating experiences that give students an opportunity to integrate and reflect on what they've learned in college. We'll talk to professors Caroline Ketcham and Tony Weaver from Elon University who co-edited the book, *Cultivating Capstones: Designing High Quality culminating Experiences for Student Learning*.

Jessie Moore (01:00):

In 2019 and 2021 surveys of recent US College graduates, conducted by the Elon Poll and the Center for Engaged Learning, only 32% of participants reported participating in a capstone experience. The more high impact educational practices they participated in though, including capstone experiences, the more likely recent graduates were to consider college worth their financial and time commitment. Capstones can serve varied purposes in a college education, but they're often a space where students can integrate with they're learning across their courses and think about how to adapt their knowledge for future goals. Let's hear from our panelists about this high impact college experience.

Caroline Ketcham (01:47):

I'm Caroline Ketcham. I'm a professor in exercise science, and I was interested in the capstone experiences because I'm really interested in the holistic experience of students and thinking about scaffolding and what our experiences are that lead up to capstone experiences on a campus. I think I entered this knowing exactly what that would be, and I've exited it having a lot more questions than answers. And so I think that's a good place to be when you're working in this area.

Tony Weaver (02:17):

I'm Tony Weaver. I'm a professor of sport management and the associate dean in the School of Communications. I really got into the capstones as a way to look back on how my career started and what I wanted to learn from the capstone. I got thrown into a capstone course when I first got here, and

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I had no idea that the capstone was different than other classes and was supposed to be taught differently. I just kind of filled in as a junior faculty member, and I ended up teaching in a capstone seminar course for about 11 years. And just thinking back to my own growth in that class, I just wanted to learn more about how faculty enter a capstone, and then what happens as they teach it, and then learn more about their experiences, obviously after they teach it. So for me, it was very personal to my own experience. Since then, like Caroline, I've learned other things that are interesting to me about the capstone, but that's how I got involved in-

Nolan Schultheis (03:21):

I did a little research prior to this interview, and I saw that the Capstone teaching process is a rigorous one for teachers and professors. And I think that taking your perspective into mind and really seeing firsthand the transformation that can happen to a professor that didn't know a thing about capstones, and now is talking about them and educating, I think it's really great that there's still people and professors that want to join this capstone kind of legion and start spreading it more college wide. What are some examples of capstones that you teach or know of?

Tony Weaver (04:00):

The capstones that I deal mostly with now are capstones in the School of Communication, so discipline specific capstones that really try to enhance the professional skills of students that are in our majors. And we just went through a curriculum change, so for us, it was fascinating to see what we thought was important, say seven to 10 years ago, and what we're hearing is important now. We've placed more emphasis on disciplinary capstones in the School of Communications, rather than at school capstone, because we felt like our students were not getting enough depth as they close out their senior year and helping them transition. And so for me, that's been an example of school level and disciplinary level capstones. And then certainly the seminar class that I've taught before, it's a great example of bringing people from different disciplines into one room and using a topic to help them understand what their core courses, how they came together, how they were infused, and then how it influences them as they move forward. So those are just a couple examples that I've been involved with.

Caroline Ketcham (05:05):

I've been involved with both of those are I think our disciplinary capstone has changed because of my experience. It used to be a very research... My course used to be a very research based experience. So students got in groups, and coming up with a research question related to exercise science, and went through the process and wrote a paper. And I've evolved it to be a little bit more of a cornerstone keystone process that they're trying to integrate multiple experiences from their undergraduate experience. And then how does that prepare them to move forward? So doing more of an e-portfolio. So some types of capstones include those, research capstones, e-portfolios. I think internships can serve as a capstone. Most of our capstones at Elon are course-based. There are some cohorted students that might do an undergraduate research experience, or a service learning, or an internship type of experience as a capstone, but we tend to be course-based at Elon. And I think that looks different at different institutions.

Nolan Schultheis (06:13):

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You had said something about internships. Are there capstone pathways that can engage internship qualities as well, capstones that function as a capstone, but also have the elements of an internship mixed in with it?

Caroline Ketcham (06:27):

I think School of Communications might be the best example of this at Elon. In the arts and sciences, again, I don't know all of them, but in my discipline, our students do less internships than some disciplines. And so we have a practicum experience that is pretty early in their curriculum and I think is teaching some of those internship types of skills. Some of the research on capstones, students really want to be prepared to go into professional fields, and I think an internship capstone is the best example of that, that they're out there and working in a field or shadowing at some level and getting a better taste of what it will be like to be in their field. And so I think from this experience, for me, I see the value of those types of experiences more than I might've before where I thought learning the discipline was really important, and the theories of a discipline was very important.

Tony Weaver (07:29):

Yeah. Nolan, I think you asked a great question because I think it starts to get you to think about what's the purpose of the internship. And I think for us, as Dr. Ketcham mentioned, we do use the internship as, I would say, a culminating experience for the student to begin the transition. So a lot of times, our students will do their internship in their junior year of... I should say the summer of their junior year, so rising seniors, which we've come to just because it gives us that year to kind of reflect on, which I think is an important part of the capstone experience, giving students some type of opportunity to think about what it is that they just participated in, trying to connect theory to practice, really getting them to understand the lessons that they've learned at the internship, but also, in some cases, to see that they... We might've taught them something in sophomore year. They went and practiced it at their internship their junior year in the summer. And then they come back senior year and we can enhance that, we can highlight that.

(08:34):

And so senior year becomes really important for a lot of our majors because they also come back with things that they weren't prepared for or they didn't know. And so now, we can use senior year to say, "Okay, well let's improve that skillset," or "Let's talk to you a little bit more about how to be better prepared next time." And so we think of the internship as, yes, they're doing hours at a location or a company, but it's so much bigger than that. And that, to me, is what makes it a capstone experience versus just going and working, is that piece to where there is some faculty student conversation, there's true reflection, there's looking at what they could have done better, and really taking that last, whether it's their last year or the last semester, to show some improvement, because we want to help them transition. We want the transition to be as smooth as possible. And so the internship's a good place for that.

Caroline Ketcham (09:30):

I think it's also helping students, before they go into it, about what they're looking for. I will say in my discipline, most of our students go onto graduate schools and many in health professions, and so they're learning potentially a lot of professional skills in these, and they're not able to actually do a lot of the work. They're not able to be a physical therapist or... Thank goodness. And so it really is having them

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think about the professional skills when they're out there in the field and learning to grow those more and more. And some of that's watching what they want to emulate, and sometimes it's watching what they don't want to emulate. And I think that's really valuable, as Dr. Weaver said, to help students reflect on those experiences.

Jessie Moore (10:17):

Your responses also highlight for me the importance of thinking about the context of our curriculum and our goals for different experiences, both throughout the curriculum and what we want to serve as the capstone or culminating experience. I'm thinking, I teach in a professional writing and rhetoric program, and there are students do an internship in their second or third year, and so it's an integrative experience. It's a chance for them to find out what it's like to work in the profession, sometimes rule out some subfields that they're not interested in, but it's definitely not a culminating experience. But at the same time, we have students in the professional writing studies minor who do take an internship as the culminating experience, and then that framing the mentor role with a faculty or staff member, the reflection, the chances to think about how they're applying, what they've learned in their courses become all the more important to really allow that to be a culminating experience for the minor, as opposed to something that is an intermediary experience in a larger picture.

Caroline Ketcham (11:26):

Yeah. And I'm going to just add, because I think when I walked into this three-year research seminar on capstones, I would've said E-portfolios were the lowest on my list of meaningful capstone experiences. And I think what Dr. Weaver and Dr. Moore just highlighted is that the e-portfolio really allows students to integrate and reflect across their experiences. So no matter where it is in their curriculum, there's pieces that might lead to that pulmonary reflection and integration. Our department is thinking about that a little bit more, of how can we help students integrate all of those across their Elon experiences.

Jessie Moore (12:10):

Caroline, you previewed, or you anticipated our next question, and you collectively and with co-authors have written about living up to the capstone promise, and also co-edited a book about cultivating capstone experiences. Can you tell us a little bit more about the multi-institutional research that informed those publications?

Caroline Ketcham (12:29):

We were seminar leaders of a capstone research experience as part of the Center for Engaged Learning. And so we brought scholars, international scholars together to come up with multi-institutional multi-year questions. And so all of those scholars are working in different contexts and really thinking about how some questions can cross over and be applicable to colleagues at many institutions. We had five teams that focused on different research questions, multi-institutional questions. And so some were looking at characteristics of capstone experiences. Some were looking at faculty development to support capstone experiences, some were looking at the identity of students and how that impacts their experience in capstones, and some were looking across, what's the communication? Does the course catalogs do websites tell the same story that institutions are trying to tell? And so I think we got a multi-level lens of capstones with our research seminar.

(13:39):

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So we got that big 30,000 foot picture of our capstones doing what we expect, as well as all the way down to, how are we considering the identity of students and what they bring to the experience? And I think there's a lot for all of us and colleagues to take from that, and apply to our individual institutions and use to meet the promise each of our institutions is trying to promise.

Tony Weaver (14:08):

The other thing I'll add to that wonderful answer, by the way, is the participants all came at the capstone, not just from a different institution, but they came at different points of their career. So some were relatively new to the capstone experience. Others had years of experience teaching it. Some weren't even teaching. Some were administration and staff. And so we got varied perspectives, not just because they came from different institutions, but because they were jumping into this with maybe a year or two experience teaching it. Some had never taught a capstone to those that had been doing this for 20 years. Just a rich array of perspectives, which I thought helped us as we moved along into year two and year three.

Caroline Ketcham (14:55):

On the Center's website, we do have a showcase page that lists publications that came out of that research seminar, in addition to the edit collection and the chapter I mentioned earlier. So we'll link to that in the show notes, and then we'll also include a discount code for the edit collection in case anybody wants to purchase that.

Nolan Schultheis (15:14):

So in the conclusion of cultivating capstones, you had a short portion about post COVID and how that has affected capstones. I was listening to your response about the multi-institutional research involvement in the seminar, and I think the fact that a seminar that happened prior to COVID, I can't imagine the capabilities following now with the level of communication that's opened up. We're talking on Zoom right now. So what do you think the future of capstones are going to look like with this increased communication and the ability for universities to kind of collaborate way more effectively than they would've in the past?

Tony Weaver (15:55):

I think your backend of your question kind of says it all. I think the ability for us to collaborate quicker, easier is certainly much better in 2023 than it was when we first started this seminar. The other thing is hopefully, I know it's an important issue to both Dr. Moore and Dr. Ketcham, is access, right? Think about how we can get in front of students easier. And so in some ways, as an example, transportation might not be an issue anymore. Or think about a working parent who's trying to go back to school and is trying to manage children and their schedules and everything going on in their life, having deep conversation about a capstone experience or helping them through it or reflecting on things are just so much easier than it used to be. And part of it is, quite honestly on our side, for me to click a button on Zoom, I can do that now, right? It's just access is so much easier.

(16:55):

And barriers that we used to have, I don't want to say they're not there anymore, they certainly are still there, but it's taught us that everything doesn't have to be face-to-face in person to be successful. We can do quite a bit from different modes and using different forms of communication. So I always try to

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hold on to that as a silver lining to what happened with COVID. It's certainly increased access and including access to capstones.

Caroline Ketcham (17:21):

Yeah, I would agree. I think it's increased access. I think it's increased the mentoring that can happen, so we can have professionals from other institutions or lived experiences jump in and have a conversation with students, or students can reach out. I do think that there will be some transition and really thinking intentionally about what is the value of being able to open up access in different ways, and then where might institutions, I don't want to say take the easy road, but I'll say take the easy road, of when are we going to also make sure we're intentional about what needs to happen and in collaboration with students. I'm teaching a capstone right now, which all the students are doing their individual e-portfolios and deep dives, but I had to bring a student in the other day who's like, "I can just work on my own." And I'm like, "No, coming in the classroom and peer editing each other's and having conversations is part of this capstone experience. Your perspective matters."

(18:31):

And so while I think it opens up, we have to also hold on to what pieces might be important in our individual context to hold onto and bring people together in a classroom or a space. And we see these at institutions who are doing online programs and bringing cohorts together for a period, for a weekend, or for whatever. And so I think there's a way to do this and increase access, and also have some of those benefits of in a room together around a table.

Jessie Moore (19:04):

Thank you both.

Nolan Schultheis (19:05):

So what makes capstone experiences an effective activity for fostering students engaged learning?

Caroline Ketcham (19:10):

I think capstone experiences fosters students engaged learning because it's really trying to put the ball in their court, that they're driving the experience and the questions, at least as I'm coming to think about it, and the classroom or the instructor might give some context so that they're walking into their capstone with some context knowledge. But a good capstone is really making what students bring to the experience as important as the experience. And so that means the student has to be engaged and involved, and vulnerable, and present, and reflective for it to be a good capstone. I think that's why it's one of the best engaged learning experiences our students can have, if it's done intentionally and thoughtfully.

Tony Weaver (20:05):

Yeah, I think that's a great answer. When I was teaching capstones, I would let students help me with the syllabus, right? It's engaged learning in so many ways. It's not just the actual doing of something, but thinking about how we're going to do this, and what are the action steps we're going to do in the next four months to make sure that it's a worthwhile experience? So it's engaging in lots of different ways. And then obviously, a lot of capstones, they're project based, they're research based. There is a doing

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piece to this that I think is important, typically, right? You mentioned internships earlier, right? There's some true engagement where they're getting involved in something, but I think it is more than just the actual project. It's the structure of the class, it's the peer-to-peer conversations, it's the faculty student relationships and conversations that develop. So, so many ways it can hit on a lot of things. And again, I think, as Dr. Ketcham mentioned, if done right.

(21:10):

I think it's not a guarantee. Just because you label something at capstone doesn't make it engaged learning, right? There needs to be some commitment to what goes into that.

Jessie Moore (21:21):

And that's a great lead into our next question for you. I'm curious what you would identify as the things that faculty and staff need to do to make it done well. What do we need to be attentive to improve the quality of capstone experiences?

Tony Weaver (21:38):

I would just start with my own experiences, just professional development. Don't assume anything just because you're a faculty member, especially a new faculty member. We shouldn't assume that people understand what our goals are of the capstone, that we have to explain to them what we're trying to get out of this class and the scaffolding that went into it prior to the building up, what we're hoping to see students do, and what their learning outcomes are. I think far too often, we just make assumptions about everybody knows what we're trying to do here, so let's just do it. I think those same conversations should be held with the student, right? So the students, when they come into the first day of that experience should be, we should discuss that with them and get out of the academic lingo of us assuming that everybody understands what we're talking about, just because we call something at Elon a capstone, that everybody knows what that means.

(22:32):

It's just not true. I think we have to break down those barriers right away. And then from there, obviously there's a lot of other things, but that, to me, is one of the biggest ones.

Caroline Ketcham (22:45):

I would also say that I think faculty need to understand that it's a really messy process. It's not a nice buttoned up course that you roll out and have a cohort of students that engage in. It really is, I think what Dr. Weaver said of sometimes making the syllabus together on the first day. My syllabus is open most of the semester, that we're developing it together and identifying what students need along the way, and when they're presenting or having conversations or need to have a coffee day or whatever. You can teach capstone 15 times and all 15 look very different. And I think that that's really invigorating and energizing, but it's also can be daunting for new faculty or people who are not prepared.

(23:33):

And so I think... We do say in the book that the resource of time and preparation for faculty is really important, and I think that we need to take that seriously, that to do a capstone, well, to lead a capstone well takes time. We need to give faculty that time and that professional development so they can integrate ideas and reflect with a cohort of people afterwards and colleagues.

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Tony Weaver (24:01):

I think faculty, they're an interesting piece to this conversation, because some faculty are not comfortable with letting control of the classroom environment. And I think in a lot of the capstones that we examined, I think one of the things that happens is you're more of a facilitator. You're going with the flow on some things. You're allowing a conversation to continue that might not be there on the schedule, but all of a sudden that's what we're doing today. And a student might have an issue that comes up and you're spending time helping them through it, and you didn't anticipate that. And so I think there's a style that goes along with this that I think not all faculty are ready for that, and they're not great at that. And I think we're oversimplifying it if you think you can just put a faculty member into a capstone and say, "Go teach it and you'll be fine," because to Caroline's point, 15 years, 15 different different outcomes.

(25:00):

That's the beauty of it, I think too, right? It's concerning, it's overwhelming, but there's a beauty in watching that all play out. And so I think paying attention to faculty in this equation is really, really important.

Nolan Schultheis (25:14):

You both have given wonderful answers as to advice for faculty members. Do you guys have any suggestions as for what students can do to make the most out of their capstone experiences?

Tony Weaver (25:24):

Go to their weakness. I treat it as a sport. If all you do is practice the same things that you're really good at, then the point of the capstone is you're not going to get the full extent. I love to see students... The word vulnerable was mentioned earlier. I love when students are saying, "I'm not great at this, I want to get better at this," or "I didn't quite get this in the curriculum, I didn't understand it when it was taught before. Can we use my project to help build that skillset?" That, to me, is where I've seen the greatest growth from a student, is to just say, "I don't know what I'm doing," or "I don't know how to do this, and I want to do better at this." And then I've seen other students do very well at capstone projects, but I don't know that they grew a lot. I think they didn't challenge themselves necessarily. They went to what they're comfortable, what they're good at, and what they're comfortable with.

(26:17):

So yeah, I would say that'd be my biggest piece of advice. And I would also tell you, I understand that I'm trying to give that to a 20, 21, 22 year old. I'm not sure I would've been ready for that kind of advice at that age either, so I get that that's not an easy conversation either.

Caroline Ketcham (26:34):

I think students should be ready to play. I think it should be fun. There is an element of challenge, but it should also be... Potentially, if you're given open reign on a topic that you're really interested in, that you want to spend time on, that you want to learn about, I think you can learn about yourself through the process, and that vulnerability and trust in your colleagues is really important. And so that's leaning into your peers, as well as the faculty member. The one I'm teaching right now, I think the hardest thing for students is they want my approval. And in a capstone, it's not about the faculty member's approval.

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It really is project-based and outcome-based of what a student wants. And so taking that initiative and having a playful spirit to make mistakes and learn from them is really important.

Nolan Schultheis (27:28):

I personally think, coming from a student's perspective, the point of challenging yourself is something I think I struggle with. It's always easier to not challenge yourself and do something you're comfortable with, in addition to what you had just said in terms of the seeking validation from the teacher. I feel I do both of those things. And so I think hearing these things about what the capstone is designed to kind of evoke in students is very interesting. And I think the way it's applied to pull those kind of concepts out of students are very interesting. I think it's a really cool structure to have the teacher kind of step back and let it be a student led thing, while still providing input and keeping you on the right course.

Tony Weaver (28:10):

And just keep in mind too, when I'm suggesting challenging yourself, I'm not asking you to pick up a whole new discipline in four months. I think we're talking about little aspects of things that should have fit into your first three and a half plus years. And so I think there's a little bit of a challenge that you can add to a capstone that could have a tremendous amount of growth for the student. And so I think it is all relative too, right? I think it always depends on risk reward for a student.

Nolan Schultheis (28:42):

For sure.

Jessie Moore (28:42):

Nolan, I think you're in an interesting position, because as a first year student, you have time to work towards capstone. So you're kind of interestingly positioned to think about, what are you learning along the way? How is it fitting together? Here at Elon, you actually get to pick which section of the core capstone you want to take. You can decide to be deliberate with that choice beyond just when is it offered, which is sometimes a guiding factor, but what culminating experience do you want at that point? And then in your major, you will have had a chance to develop more expertise, and hopefully, by then, feel a little bit more comfortable with being vulnerable and trying something that's still a challenge for you. But it'll be a different scale of challenge than what it might feel like now.

Caroline Ketcham (29:29):

And I think what Dr. Moore is highlighting is that capstones at many universities are not a singular experience. You can intentionally, as a student, build some of these together to get what you need. I think where it comes together is potentially helping you translate that into a job interview or a graduate program interview. And so I think some of the guidance by faculty is helping you understand those translational skills that you have to help you build the stories that show your values and the expertise you've gained. And so I think that's part of what this all, is it's not a one and done, but multiple little things along the way.

Tony Weaver (30:15):

Caroline, would you say your capstone... I feel like the relationship changes, at least the relationship I had with students. They're kind of crossing over to that kind of that peer, whereas a first year or

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sophomore, I would say I probably led more of a traditional relationship where I'm faculty, you're a student, right? And then by the time you're seniors and you've been through some experiences, I felt like the classroom environment and the capstone was more... We had more conversation. We had more peer-to-peer kind of debates and discussions, and the back and forth was more about helping than it was maintaining the traditional relationship with faculty students. So I really enjoyed that piece to capstone in the classroom, and I don't know if you feel that way. It sounds like some of the things you're talking about with the e-portfolio, you're kind of having some of those conversations as well.

Caroline Ketcham (31:15):

Yeah, absolutely. I think it's about pushing students to all lean into each other's work. I get so... Their peer editing or peer reviewing things, and it's like, did you like to read it? Did you understand it? Some of those just... Help each other out. If you were bored or want more explanation,, let each other know. That shouldn't all be coming from the faculty. But that's what I mean about the playful spirit of it all, because I think students have learned, by the time we see them in a capstone, to read the assignment, hit the marks, turn it in and get a grade. And this is so much more than, what are your expectations? I don't know. What are your expectations? What do you want out of this? What did you like? What didn't you like? Ask your three friends that you're laughing with to be honest with you, because that's what...

(32:13):

I hate the term, but I'll use it anyway.

(32:16):

... the real world is all about, right? You're not just getting a grade on an assignment, but you're working with people, and it has to be... People have to want to engage in it, and you want to make a product that people want to engage with. And so your best resource are your peers.

Tony Weaver (32:36):

Yeah. My best days in the capstone, I always felt like they kind of forgot I was there.

Caroline Ketcham (32:40):

Right.

Tony Weaver (32:42):

I was just another student. I was just sitting in the discussion or working on the project right there with them, and they forgot that I was supposed to be leading this class or doing whatever it is I was supposed to be doing that day. And that, to me, was when the greatest discussions, the greatest learning happen. And I appreciate it's harder to do that in maybe a first year class or a sophomore year class, but those were some of the best days. For me as a faculty member, those were some of the best days teaching, right? You kind of really felt like good things happened that day.

Caroline Ketcham (33:17):

Yeah.

Nolan Schultheis (33:17):

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I think breaking that robotic nature of, look at the rubric, get the work done, turn it in, look for the grade is very important, especially coming from someone who, in my high school, I feel like that was all I did. I didn't really feel like the work I was doing kind of suited me. And I think the capstone idea of letting it suit you and guiding you along that way and kind of showing you that there's more to education and there's more to knowledge than simply a grade, I think that's very important. I think that's an incredible thing that the capstone is allowing students to kind of fully recognize. Now,

Tony Weaver (33:58):

Nolan, what year did you say you were?

Nolan Schultheis (34:00):

I'm a first year.

Tony Weaver (34:02):

First year what? Grad student? First year like a PhD [inaudible 00:34:05]? You cannot not be first year.

Caroline Ketcham (34:06):

First year faculty?

Tony Weaver (34:07):

Yeah. The fact that you're even talking that way would suggest that you are very well prepared for your own education. You're very thoughtful in how you think about what you expect out of your education. So keep thinking like that.

Nolan Schultheis (34:24):

Trying to be. And I appreciate that. In the center for Engaged Learning's 2019 and 2021 surveys of recent college graduates, only about 32% of participants reported taking part in a capstone experience during college. Why should students seek out capstone experiences?

Tony Weaver (34:40):

A lot of what we just mentioned. I think it's so much... There's so much so growth opportunity for their own individual transition, their own individual experiences, their own individual educational opportunities. And then there's obviously just the practical side, right? You might do some really good work that could go on your resume, you're going to produce something. There's a lot of that too that, the tangible stuff. But the intangible, it's off the charts, right? So I think there's a lot of practical useful pieces to the capstone, but there's things... Lifelong learning can begin at the capstone, and I think that's a big part of why we're involved in some of this stuff.

Caroline Ketcham (35:23):

That statistic I've always think really highlights probably that we're not communicating to students that they were actually in a capstone. And so if students aren't able to recognize it's a capstone, I think we're failing, as an institution, to help with the messaging and the communication. And so some of that, it might be true, but I think some of it is the communication and professional development for faculty, so

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that a capstone does feel like a capstone, so that when you're done, you can acknowledge that you had it.

Jessie Moore (35:58):

I think that's a really important reminder, Caroline, that as we look at, whether it's the center's surveys or the national surveys to engagement, some of those numbers seem uncharacteristically low, and it says a lot about misalignment and how we talk about capstones with our students and our alumni, and about the value of experiences that they've had in those spaces. And we do see in the center's survey, that if they had a capstone experience and one of the other high impact practices, like undergraduate research or an internship, that they're more likely to consider the cost and time commitment of college worthwhile. And so there is something of when it was a good experience, it is additive. And so a lot of our work, I think as faculty and staff, is making sure that it's a good experience, that we are communicating the goals and values of to students and to others.

Caroline Ketcham (36:52):

And it makes me think about Elon is doing some work on mentoring right now. And both of those experiences, if they're stacked, they might have a mentor who's helping them reflect on experiences outside the one that they're doing together. And so I think it's also that, that it's people asking students along the way about their capstones, not it just being labeled or talking about it in a classroom, but having peers and professors ask about their experiences so that they can talk about those capstones or remind them that they might've had them.

Jessie Moore (37:30):

Our last question then is, is there anything else you'd like our listeners to know about capstones in college or about your edit collection, Cultivating Capstones?

Tony Weaver (37:40):

I'm fascinated by situational experiences in capstones. So we had discussed times where students were not doing well in capstones. I think the way we talk about capstones, it's always this, they get to the capstone and there's success, and everybody's happy and you produced a great product, or you did a good research. And I don't think we talk enough about what happens when the student gets there and it doesn't go well. And how do we deal with that as a faculty member? And what do we do about it? And so I hope that as we look toward the future of capstones, we're ready to discuss those types of situations. Because I do think sometimes, when we talk about the label of capstones, we assume that they're all successful. Every student that goes into a capstone and it's run right means that they're going to produce great work and everybody's happy.

(38:33):

But I think you can run a capstone really well, you can have students that are well prepared, but you still have students that don't do the work that's necessary to suggest that they're ready to transition to their next phase. And what does that conversation look like? What kind of lessons can be learned when you don't produce what needs to be produced? Because it is still a part of the educational experience. And we talk a lot about academic rigor. You would think that somewhere in the capstone, there should be some display of academic rigor and what happens when you have a student that can't meet that? I know it would always come up in the time that we spent together in a lot of different ways, but I hope that

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that piece of the capstone experience gets reviewed and scholarship is developed off of that, or more scholarship is developed off of that.

Caroline Ketcham (39:27):

I think it's a real opportunities for institutions and departments and programs to revisit it often and think about what's working and what's not working. From my personal experience, what I thought was an effective capstone is changing. And so having my colleagues in my department think about that together, I think is really important. And I think institutions need to do that as well, and think about their context and the students that are coming and where they're going. And so I think that this is a conversation that should be revisited often, and it's not just, "Okay, we have a good one. Now, let's move on." I think we constantly need to look at the dynamics of our institutions and build capstones that meet the students that we're serving.

Tony Weaver (40:16):

And those can be hard conversations, right, Dr. Ketcham? Faculty get locked into what they've taught and how they've taught it. And so when you do that, it is not an easy conversation. Trying to get everybody to buy into what the capstone will change to or what it will look like, I think it's incredibly necessary, like you said, but I would also just say it can get hard to get through, right? And so I think doing that on a regular basis hopefully will eliminate a lot of those challenges.

Caroline Ketcham (40:51):

Thank you both for spending time with us today. You gave us lots of really interesting nuggets to think on. And as always, it's a joy of spending some time with you.

Jessie Moore (41:00):

Thank you both.

Tony Weaver (41:01):

Thank you.

Nolan Schultheis (41:02):

Thank you guys.

Tony Weaver (41:03):

Dr. Moore and Nolan, thank you very much. Good interview.

Caroline Ketcham (41:05):

Yeah.

Nolan Schultheis (41:05):

Yes, thank you as well. It was very nice meeting you.

Jessie Moore (41:14):

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So Nolan, what were some of the key takeaways for you from this conversation?

Nolan Schultheis (41:17):

I think for me, one of the largest takeaways that I had was the idea that the capstones or more of a student led experience than a teacher led experience, and I think that's very interesting. And the ability for students to kind of direct what they want to learn and direct kind of the curriculum of the class, I feel like that's very engaging and much more beneficial for the student than opposed to just a straight teacher led course.

Jessie Moore (41:45):

Yeah, that stood out to me as well. And I think that that flexibility to allow students to really address the learning goals they have, the professional goals that they have... We heard about taking risks or being vulnerable, and digging into something that you might not be as good at yet, but giving learners that space requires a lot of flexibility on the part of instructors. It requires a little bit of bravery and play on part of students, and that was another term we heard Professor Ketcham use, the playfulness of it. But that also means that there's benefit in institutions, colleges, and universities not having a one size fits all capstone, but thinking about how to contextualize capstones within degree programs, how to offer a couple different options for capstones so that students really can pick the one that's the best fit for integrating what they've learned and transitioning to whatever their future goal is.

Nolan Schultheis (42:45):

It seemed like the capstones are a pretty simple concept whenever you actually learn about them. It's just like nobody knows. They're like, "What the heck's a capstone?"

Jessie Moore (42:52):

And that's an important point too, actually, that students don't necessarily know what they are. And so we also need to make sure that when we talk about capstones, we're more transparent about what they can be and why students should care about them.

(43:16):

Once again, I'm Jessie Moore.

Nolan Schultheis (43:18):

And I'm Nolan Schultheis. Thank you for joining us for Making College Worth It from Elon University's Center for Engaged Learning.

Jessie Moore (43:24):

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