

Your Capstone Class

Advisees' Questions and an Advisor's Answers

The psychology capstone requirement is described accurately in the *IUPUI Campus Bulletin*, but that description fails to provide answers to several questions I often receive from my advisees about their capstone classes. This article will provide answers to those questions.

What is a capstone class, and why am I required to take one?

In an architectural context, a capstone is the top-most stone that completes a building. In an academic context, a capstone is the final class that completes a student's curriculum. Capstone classes provide students with an opportunity "to demonstrate comprehensive learning in their major through some type of product or performance" (Palomba & Banta, 1999, p. 124). In other words, a capstone is a class in which senior psychology majors are required to pull together what they have learned in their previous classes and use this integrating experience to demonstrate they are capable of doing what they should be able to do as they graduate from the program (e.g., think critically, perform research, and write in APA style). This process serves a dual purpose. It provides psychology majors with a final opportunity to practice and demonstrate the skills they will need to succeed after graduation on the job or in graduate school. It also presents the Psychology Department faculty with a final opportunity to observe student learning and to assess whether or not they have been successful in their mission to produce competent psychology majors.

What kinds of capstone classes are available?

Most psychology departments offer only one capstone class, and a few offer no capstone at all. The IUPUI Psychology Department offers its majors a choice of the three following types of capstones.

- An empirical research project, which can be conducted (a) in a laboratory class dedicated to the study of a particular sub-discipline of psychology (e.g., social, developmental, or clinical rehabilitation psychology) or in an honors research class. The currently offered classes that will satisfy the research capstone requirement are B461, B471, B481, and B499.
- An on-the-job practicum, which allows students to apply what they have learned about a particular sub-discipline of psychology (e.g., industrial/organizational or clinical rehabilitation psychology) in the workplace. The classes that will satisfy the practicum capstone requirement are B462 and B482.
- A scholarly seminar, which provides students with the opportunities to (a) perform an in-depth examination of a sub-discipline of psychology in which they have an occupational interest, (b) engage in a collaborative research project with their classmates, and (c) create a professional planning portfolio designed to facilitate their transition to life after college (i.e., employment or graduate school). The class that will satisfy the seminar capstone requirement is B454.

What capstone class should I take?

The answer to this question is dependent upon your answer to the following two questions.

- What degree are you seeking? If you are pursuing a Bachelor of Arts (BA) degree, you may satisfy your capstone requirement by completing any of the classes described in the preceding section (i.e., a research project, a practicum, or the seminar). If you are pursuing a Bachelor of Science (BS)

degree, you must complete an empirical research project. *Important Note:* Unless you specifically chose the BA option when you applied for acceptance into the School of Science, you were automatically assigned as a BS student. If you would like to change your degree program, you may do so by completing the appropriate forms available in the School of Science Office (LD 222).

- What are you preparing to do after you graduate? If you plan to enter a graduate program and/or profession that will require you to perform research (e.g., a thesis or clinical trials), then a capstone research project is your wisest choice. If you plan to apply the principles you have learned as an undergraduate psychology major in the workplace after graduation, then the practicum is your best alternative. If you are unsure of your post-baccalaureate goals or if you would like to leave your options open, the seminar is your most sensible option.

When should I take my capstone class?

The answer to this question is, once again, dependent upon the answer to two more questions.

- How should I prepare for my capstone? Students should have completed the majority of their psychology classes before they enroll in their capstone, and they should prepare themselves for specific capstones by completing certain prerequisites. Research capstones typically require B305 (Statistics) and B311 (Introductory Laboratory) as prerequisites, and those that deal with specific sub-disciplines of psychology also require completion of the appropriate content class (e.g., B370 Social Psychology is a prerequisite for B471 Capstone Laboratory in Social Psychology). Practicum capstones require the completion of the appropriate content class (e.g., B386 Counseling is a prerequisite for B482 Capstone Practicum in Clinical Rehabilitation Psychology). It is important to note that these are the minimum prerequisites for these capstones. Students should not attempt to complete their capstone requirements until they have completed at least 30 of their 40 required hours in psychology. They also should not take their required methods classes (i.e., B305 and B311) just to “get them out of the way.” It would be extremely unfortunate for a group of senior psychology majors to attempt a capstone research project if they had forgotten the skills they acquired in their Statistics and Introductory Laboratory classes.
- When should I take my capstone? Once a student has chosen a capstone and prepared for it, the next question becomes, “When should I take it?” Most capstones are offered on a regular basis (e.g., B454 Capstone Seminar is offered every fall semester), but unforeseen circumstances can disrupt this regularity (e.g., B454 was cancelled three weeks before the beginning of fall 2001 because of low enrollment, much to the dismay of several senior psychology majors who assumed they could wait until the last minute to register for it). Students can maximize the probability of enrolling in their preferred capstones during their semesters of choice by (a) becoming aware of when their preferred capstones are usually offered and (b) registering early to insure their capstones will not be cancelled due to low enrollment.

Reference

Palomba, C. A. & Banta, T. W. (1999). *Assessment essentials: Planning, implementing, and improving assessment in higher education*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.