



Trachtenberg School of Public Policy and Public Administration
The George Washington University • PPPA 6019 • Spring 2015

Master of Public Policy Capstone Syllabus

PPPA 6019: GW MPP Capstone



Instructors

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Capstone Prerequisites

Prior completion of all core courses and completion of all degree requirements by the end of the current spring or forthcoming summer semester; otherwise, permission of the instructor is required.

Course Description

Congratulations on reaching the final semester of the MPP program at GW's Trachtenberg School. This capstone is intended to be a highly integrative undertaking. The MPP program begins broadly with required courses and then narrows to a more specialized field of concentration. Now, at the conclusion of the program, the capstone reflects a broad perspective once more, seeks to help synthesize many diverse components of the curriculum, launches a major *pro bono* project of value to an external client, and brings closure to the GW MPP experience.

Student Learning Objectives

At the end of this course, the goals are to have gained expertise to:

- Scope research to meet client needs and resolve analytic challenges in the face of ambiguity and dissonance;
- Identify and apply appropriate research methods to conduct and deliver a strong, solid study that is responsive to client needs;
- Effectively manage an intense, demanding research process;
- Integrate and apply knowledge and skills gained in MPP courses;
- Communicate complex research findings effectively to both academic and practitioner audiences.

Capstone Assignments and Grading Page

10%	Proposal; LOA; IRB; use of core courses	7-9
10%	Class presentation of proposal	9
NG	IRB certification	10
10%	Participation, teamwork, communication	11
20%	Final GW presentation	13
50%	GW written report & final report to client	14
NG	MPP program review	11
NG	Team efficacy survey	11
NG	Final research presentation to client	15

NG = Not graded but necessary for course completion

Course Practices and Policies

- The capstone has a fine-tuned schedule of important assignments. Careful planning and watching the calendar is crucial in order to thoroughly prepare and polish all course presentations, reports, certification, and evaluations. Review the syllabus early and often. (Obligatory disclaimer: This syllabus is still subject to change.)
- Course communication will be conducted via email and Blackboard, while each team may create its own site (such as Google Groups).
- The attached standard Trachtenberg School policies apply fully.
- Capstone courses have also always followed these strict policies:
 - never extending due dates for assignments (barring the most extreme circumstances),
 - treating attendance as mandatory with significant deductions for absences, and
 - concluding with major, substantive presentations.

◆ Getting Started & Project Overview (November-January)

Major challenges: In conducting valuable research for an external client, teams should design and implement a substantial project that addresses a public policy issue or program evaluation and will take advantage of knowledge and tools acquired in previous MPP courses.

Successfully accomplishing this ambitious goal – in the relatively tight span of about twelve weeks – requires more than simply a mastery of prior MPP courses; it requires moving rapidly with adroit planning, aggressive time management, resourcefulness, and creativity, along with eager, patient, and congenial collaboration. Ultimately, the final product should be a source of professional satisfaction, a genuine contribution to the client, and a worthy culmination of the achievement of earning an MPP degree at GW's Trachtenberg School.

Team section & team size: Members of a project team must all be enrolled in the same capstone section. Each project team will ordinarily consist of four people.

Team assembly: Capstone instructors make the final selection among nominated team members while trying to accommodate shared interests as well as “the greatest good for the greatest number,” as Bentham would say. Past MPP capstone graduates strongly recommend having at least one person in each group who has taken the program evaluation course. If possible, groups will be assembled and confirmed before Thanksgiving.

Project topics: Most teams prefer obtaining projects using personal networks and/or directly contacting organizations in areas of special interest. Also, the instructor may have secured a few backup projects. The instructor must approve all capstone projects.

Ordinarily, projects must involve both: (a) a “field component” with at least some original data gathering (not merely secondary data), such as semi-structured interviews, online surveys, focus groups, and (b) a major analytical component, not merely data collection for a client (although if the client primarily wants the new data, extensive analysis can be added to satisfy to GW requirements).

Sometimes a client will want less than needed to satisfy essential elements of a capstone project; sometimes they may require more. Thus, the final report/presentation submitted at GW will often differ from the final report/presentation for the client.

Avoid even the appearance of any conflict of interest. If there is any doubt, please consult your instructor early in the process. Projects cannot be conducted for an organization branch employing any team member or their families. At an early stage, make sure your client is told in writing of all current and recent employers or internships.

Client negotiations: Feel empowered to take a proactive stance when you negotiate the research design with the client. Not only do you probably know far more about all sorts of research methods than does the client, you also bring a fresh look at a situation and may see valuable, relevant questions that the client ought to ask but has not. After your team ponders the client's situation, you may want to urge the client to add or modify research questions or proposed methodology to improve the study.

While it is true that "it's all about the client," serving a client well means giving them the benefit of your critical and creative thinking and not being passive about the formulation of the project.

Advocacy clients: Any client who insists that you frame your research in a way that is preordained to generate their preferred outcome — or insists that you must unquestioningly accept all of their policy assumptions — is a poor choice for a client.

Any client who requires as a deliverable that you convert your research into a "compelling advocacy document" (as one prospective client wrote) must be informed that our role is strictly to conduct thorough, solid, defensible, and objective policy research — not to assemble ammunition for them. So please do not agree to rewrite your research as propaganda (to use a harsh word for it).

Declined Clients: Please be good ambassadors for your MPP program. In particular, as soon as you are sure you have a final client, please send all those who expressed an interest a note profusely thanking them, along with a vague consoling explanation that you needed to go in another direction this semester.



If you see any future potential at all, please also tell them: unless they object, you'd like to add them to our School's list of worthwhile organizations that might have research areas of interest

to future capstone teams. Then, please forward to your instructor the organization name, contact person, and contact information, along with the basic project idea that was suggested. That would assist future capstones and may even be of value this semester.

Project planning: The calendar poses a challenge for all projects and careful adherence to internal team deadlines is crucial. The Gantt chart below shows a suggested schedule.

Sample Gantt Chart for Capstone Project	Nov-Dec	January			February				March					April				M
	Wk	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	B	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16
Assemble team; ponder ideal clients and topics																		
Obtain client/project																		
Ethics certification																		
Develop LOA & Plan																		
Proposal presentation																		
Draft lit review																		
Data collection																		
Data analysis																		
Prepare draft report																		
Submit final report/PPT																		
Final GW presentation																		
Revise report & PPT																		
Final presentation & report to the client																		

◆ Initial Project Plan (January-February)

Work on the overall project plan should begin as soon as you find a suitable client. The project plan will include these five components:

1. Cover page: Description of client and their request.
A short (no more than one page page) description of your client, the client's key question(s), and your understanding of their decision context (i.e. Why do they want this question answered? What will they hope to do with the analysis you provide to them?)
2. A written project proposal: see below on this page for details.
3. A signed client letter of agreement (LOA); see page 8 for details.
4. IRB certifications for all team members; see page 9 for details.
5. Review of relevant concepts and tools from the MPP curriculum; see page 10 for details.

Due: All five components should be submitted together to your research adviser and instructor via email no later than Monday/Tuesday of the second week of February. Please also give them a stapled, hard-copy set of these materials at the next meeting.

Written proposal: The project proposal (drawing on the LOA) should be five to ten pages (1.5 line spacing; 12 pt. serif font, such as Times or Cambria). Please be sure to include these elements:

- The proposed project should have clearly defined research questions that address specific needs and broad objectives of the client (and, possibly, additional analytical elements for the GW capstone).
- At least a preliminary literature review should have been conducted by this stage, with highlights included in the proposal summary.
- Include an outline of the research methodology, along with a timeline to accomplish major steps such as constructing measurement instruments, collecting the field data, conducting the data analysis, writing the final report, preparing the final presentation, and any other key deadlines.
- Also specify any "issues" that might be potentially problematic.

◆ Client Letter of Agreement (due mid-February)

LOA: Rather than a Statement of Work (SOW) that might imply a legal contractual obligation, the term "Letter of Agreement" (LOA) has a more informal sound but still defines an important joint commitment. Early in the discussions with a client, mention that the research really begins after the instructor has approved and they have signed a short letter of agreement.

The LOA should exclude entirely intra-GW steps (such as our class presentations) and include the following:

- Objectives / major research questions
- Research design plan (basic layout of methodology, noted as the likely and expected approach)
- Planned timeline, especially major milestones with the client
 - Devising measurement instruments (client approval)
 - Collecting field data/interviews (client assistance)
 - Any other "process" dates with client involvement where specific data must be furnished
 - Final presentation(s) to the client in May
- Communications
 - Client liaison name and contact information
 - Capstone liaison name(s) and contact information
 - A polite statement of turnaround expectations
- Deliverables (products to be presented to the client)
 - Team presentation(s) in May
 - Written report the first week in May
 - Other specified materials, if any
- Research ethics (show sensitivity to the "spirit of IRB")
 - Note protection of anonymity and confidentiality
 - Note that all team members will be certified as having completed and passed GW's IRB training program for social and behavioral science research
- Signatures and dates (for client representative and team)

Important: Please get email approval for the final LOA text from the instructor before giving the final version to the client. A model LOA is available from the instructor.

Due: The signed LOA is due as part of your initial project packet no later than Monday/Tuesday of the second week of February. (Page 7.)

◆ MPP Core Course Review (due mid-February)

The capstone's "integrative experience" is an occasion for a fresh look at foundational courses taken for the MPP degree. Thus, your team should review your coursework to identify concepts, tools, and literature most relevant to your capstone project.

Your review should cover the following courses:

- PPPA 6011: Introduction to Public Policy
- PPPA 6002: Research Methods and Applied Statistics
- PPPA 6013: Econometrics
- PPPA 6014: Economics in Policy Analysis
- PPPA 6015: Benefit-Cost Analysis
- PPPA 6016: Program Evaluation
- PPPA 6005: Public Budgeting, Revenue, and Expenditure Analysis
- Choose one other course with relevance to your capstone project.

Please use opportunity to reflect on core courses and identify their most valuable lessons and themes. It is important that team members share this exercise, with each taking initial responsibility for two courses, and then all members amending/refining each other's drafts.

Put your course reviews into an eight-page document (one single-spaced page per course), ideally using a bullet format. For each course, list key concepts and tools most applicable to your project, and include a short annotated bibliography of at least two course readings likely to be most helpful in conducting your project.

Due: This is due as part of your initial project packet no later than Monday/Tuesday of the second week of February. (Page 7.)

◆ Proposal Presentation (due last week of February)

Date: The last week in February, each team will make a 10-15 minute presentation of their research plan.

Evaluation criteria:

- **Style:** As with all presentations, effective speaking that is clear, energetic, and well organized is vital. (All should participate.)
- **Substance:** The presentation should outline a sound and feasible research plan reflecting early discussion with the client.

◆ IRB Ethics Training Requirement (due mid-February)

Purpose: Federal regulations now require researchers to undergo ethics training and certification for research projects they undertake. Because the research projects for this course are considered “professional training” and are not ordinarily published, IRB ethics certification is not legally required for these projects. (If publication is pursued at a later date, IRB approval will then need to be obtained.)

High ethical standards are always an integral part of the Trachtenberg curriculum and these federal requirements certainly will be pertinent to careers as policy researchers and public service professionals. Thus, understanding the principles and basics of these regulations is important.



Task: To ensure familiarity with these regulations, the online CITI Training Program must be completed with a score of 80% or higher. To get started, please follow these steps:

- Register as a new user at www.citiprogram.org
- Be sure to remember your user name and password.
- Institution: George Washington University (ignore others)
- Then answer questions 2 through 4.
- For question 5, Q1, check “no”; for Q2, “no” is fine.
- Next page only requires: GW email; Department=Trachtenberg School; and Role=Student researcher–graduate level
- Next page, check only “Human Subjects Research Training”
- Next page, click “no” to go to “CITI Basic Course”
- Next page, check only “Social and Behavioral Sciences”
- Next “no” for HIPS; “no” for GCP, click “Finalize Registration.”
- Click “Social & Behavioral Research” under “George Washington University Courses” to start the ten modules.

Upon completing the program, you will receive a certification document. Make two copies and keep a copy for your own records.

Due: Certificates are due as part of your initial project packet no later than Monday/Tuesday of the second week of February. (Page 7.)

◆ **Team Efficacy Survey (March)**

Near the middle of the semester, you will receive an email for a short survey to be administered online via SurveyMonkey regarding your team's functioning and overall dynamics. A follow-up survey may be administered at the end of the semester. Happily, capstone teams usually work quite professionally and collegially.

◆ **MPP Program Feedback (March)**

This concluding semester is an ideal time to review the MPP program and provide the Trachtenberg School with valuable feedback. Your feedback is collected with an online survey that should take about fifteen minutes to complete.

Survey responses will be aggregated before being shared with the TSPPPA faculty at the end of May. Your specific responses will not be associated with your name. The survey software will, however, track whether you submitted the survey and satisfied this requirement for completion of the capstone.

You will receive an email in early March with more instructions on how to complete the survey. The survey link will be sent to the email address associated with your Blackboard account.

Due: All MPP capstone students must complete this online survey by the end of March (30/31).

◆ **Capstone Participation & Communication**

A successful capstone hinges on sustained engagement from start to finish. To be specific:

- Regular class attendance and helpful remarks in class discussions;
- Reliable, effective contributions to the team capstone project;
- Meeting all team and class deadlines.

◆ **Intermediate Steps for the Written Report**

Having a few progressive steps due throughout the semester helps enormously with the challenge of the capstone project. Even the project plan presentation in February serves as a useful template for the subsequent final presentations at GW and to the client. Two other important intermediate steps will also prove valuable.

Literature Review (due the first week in March)

The literature review should be emailed to instructor and research adviser the first week of March. The goal is a review that will be sufficiently thorough and polished that it can serve, with few amendments, as the literature review for the final report. The length will vary depending on the research questions. Rather than an overly condensed review, it is probably better to err on side of a more extensive and thorough lit review that can be tightened later as needed.

Draft Report (due the second week in April)

Two weeks before the final report is due, email a draft of the report to the instructor and research adviser. Some sections – parts of the data analysis, for example – may be incomplete and nothing more than an outline. However, this exercise will advance the process and provide an opportunity for feedback prior to the short period between the final GW report and the final report to the client.

◆ **Special Capstone Resources: Rigby Review Modules**

TSPPPA's Elizabeth Rigby recently prepared five excellent modules that review material that you may find especially valuable during the capstone. While not obligatory, you are strongly encouraged to listen to these modules during January and February.

◆ Final Project: GW Presentation

At the end of the semester, before giving a written report and oral summary to the client, each team will make a formal oral presentation to the capstone class, along with invited faculty and students.

Elements: All team members should participate in a 15-minute summary of the project to be followed by up to ten minutes of questions and discussion. Condensing an extensive project requires carefully focusing on the most critical elements and findings, rather than attempting to communicate every detail.

Presentations should include the following:

1. The identity of the client
2. Central research questions, plus their importance to the client
3. Any relevant insights and highlights from the literature review
4. A brief explanation of the methodology
5. Findings and lessons learned
6. A short summary of any challenges and how they were addressed
7. Next steps and recommendations to the client

Evaluation: These two basic criteria will again be used:

- **Style:** aiming for an engrossing, lively, focused talk, supplemented with uncluttered, attractive, informative visual aids.
- **Substance:** achieving a tightly edited, logically developed, effectively analyzed, and convincingly argued report of the research.



Dates: Final presentations will April 27-28. Please email the PowerPoint file by noon the day before the presentation.

Attendance and active participation in the discussions of other capstone presentations is also important; details on more formal roles as “discussants” will be provided later.

◆ Final Project: Written Report

Format: The final capstone project report should be no more than 35 pages with 1.5 line spacing, one-inch margins, and a 12 pt. serif font. Supplementary appendices (e.g., full text of questionnaires) do not have a page limit. All citations (name, year, page) and the references section should use standard APA formats. Extra comments beyond the flow of the text should be incorporated as footnotes and not endnotes. Of course, grammar and punctuation should not depart discernibly from “Edited Standard Written English.”

Structure: The final report should include:

- Title page
- Table of Contents
- Acknowledgements (thanks to client, key sources, and others)
- Executive Summary (ideally one page)
- Body (31 pages maximum)
 1. INTRODUCTION & BACKGROUND
 - Statement of the problem (why important and to whom)
 - Objectives of the research
 - Specific research question (may also be stated after lit rev)
 2. LITERATURE REVIEW
 - Summary of relevant findings from the literature review
 - Discussion of how prior research informed the research plan
 3. METHODOLOGY

Full explanation of how the study was conducted (including how key concepts were operationalized; data collection; the response rates; and so forth)
 4. ANALYSIS OF RESEARCH FINDINGS
 5. DISCUSSION / CONCLUSIONS / RECOMMENDATIONS

This section should also include acknowledgements of limits on the internal and external validity of the research.
 6. REFERENCES / SOURCES CITED
- Appendices (Appendix A: name and contact information of the client liaison; and, e.g., full text of any questionnaires).

Future clients: As a separate submission for the benefit of future capstone classes, it would be helpful to provide a list of any other potential clients (and individual contacts if possible) that might be interested in future MPP projects.

Project evaluation: The review form for the final capstone project is attached at the end of this syllabus.

Date: Please email the file for the final written report by noon the day before the final presentation. Please turn in one spiral-bound copy of the report no later than the evening of the presentation.

◆ **Final Project: Client Deliverables**

After receiving feedback on the final oral and written reports at GW, budget time to then revise them for the client. The full formal report is not ideal for most clients, so it will need to be edited and usually condensed into a more appropriate format.



Likewise, the oral presentation ought to be specially tailored for the client. Most clients prefer an emphasis on the findings and recommendations with less space and time devoted to the methodology. Do not be surprised if clients also ask for comment on the broader implications of your findings far beyond the actual recommendations in your report.

The instructor will contact clients for their critiques of teams' performances in developing, conducting, and communicating the research.

2015 MPP Capstone Schedule

Week 1	Jan 12-13	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Capstone workshop session: Getting Started For an early start, obtain IRB certification (p. 10)
Week 2	Jan 19-20	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◇ Team meeting and optional consultation with advisers
Week 3	Jan 26-27	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Capstone workshop session: Interpersonal Dimensions
Week 4	Feb 2-3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Capstone workshop session: Communication
Week 5	Feb 9-10	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◇ Team meeting and consultation with advisers ■ Due: Email capstone project plan (p. 7)
Week 6	Feb 16-17	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◇ Team meeting and optional consultation with advisers
Week 7	Feb 23-24	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Capstone workshop session: Project Plan Presentations ■ Due: Presentation of capstone project plan (p. 9)
Week 8	Mar 2-3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◇ Team meetings and consultations with advisers ■ Due: Email draft literature review (p. 12)
[Break] Week 9	Mar 9-10 Mar 16-17	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◇ Team meetings and consultations with advisers ■ Due: Online team efficacy survey (p. 11)
Week 10	Mar 23-24	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◇ Team meetings and consultations with advisers
Week 11	Mar 30-31	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◇ Team meetings and consultations with advisers ■ Due: Online MPP program feedback (p. 11)
Week 12	April 6-7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◇ Team meetings and consultations with advisers
Week 13	April 13-14	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◇ Team meetings and consultations with advisers ■ Due: Draft GW capstone project report (p. 12)
Week 14	April 20-21	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◇ Team meetings and consultations with advisers
Week 15	April 27-28	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Capstone session: Final GW Presentations ■ Due: Team presentations at GW (p. 10) ■ Due: Final GW project report (day before presentation)
TBD	May	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Due: Team presentations to client (p. 15) ■ Due: Final report to client (p. 15)

Evaluation of MPP Capstone Research Project	<i>Excellent: A</i> Thorough, very creative, outstanding writing style, thoughtfully analyzed, exceptional scholarly or practical quality.	<i>Very good: A-</i> Some creativity, strong analytical approaches, well reasoned, clearly meets professional standards.	<i>Good: B+</i> Sound work without serious analytical shortcomings. Achieves basic objectives but not excelling in all areas.	<i>Adequate: B</i> Competent work but with some notable and nontrivial weaknesses.	<i>Borderline: B-</i> Weak but meets minimal expectations. Analysis and other important elements are incomplete and/or substandard.	<i>Deficient: C</i> Inadequate work that does not meet minimal expectations... Poor development; flawed by major errors.	<i>Unacceptable</i> Overall work fails to meet minimal expectations for credit. Pervasive weaknesses and limitations.
Introduction & background							
Research questions							
Literature review							
Methodology							
Analysis of findings							
Conclusions							
Use of MPP courses & skills							
Clarity of writing							
Responsiveness to client							
Overall presentation (slides, speaking effectiveness, etc)							
OVERALL							

Standard Trachtenberg School Policies

1. **The Syllabus:** This syllabus is a guide to the course. Sound educational practice requires flexibility and the instructor may therefore, at her/his discretion, change content and requirements during the semester.

2. **Incompletes:** A student must consult with the instructor to obtain a grade of "I" (incomplete) no later than the last day of classes in a semester. At that time, the student and instructor will both sign the CCAS contract for incompletes and submit a copy to the School Director. Please consult the TSPPPA Student Handbook or visit the website for the complete CCAS policy on incompletes.

3. **Submission of Written Work Products Outside the Classroom:** It is the responsibility of the student to ensure that an instructor receives each written assignment. Students can submit written work electronically with the express permission of the instructor.

4. **Policy on Late Work:** All work must be turned in by the assigned due date in order to receive full credit for that assignment, unless an exception is expressly made by the instructor.

5. **Academic Honesty:** For the GW Code of Academic Integrity, see gwu.edu/~ntegrity. All examinations, papers, and other graded work products and assignments are to be completed in conformity with the Code. Its definition of plagiarism: "intentionally representing the words, ideas, or sequence of ideas of another as one's own in any academic exercise; failure to attribute any of the following: quotations, paraphrases, or borrowed information."

6. **Changing Grades after Completion of the Course:** No changes can be made in grades after the conclusion of the semester, other than in cases of clerical error.

7. **Religious Holidays:** Religiously observant students should notify the instructor the first week of classes regarding any session that will be missed; the courtesy of an absence without penalty will be extended.

8. **Accommodation for Students with Disabilities:** To receive accommodations on the basis of disability, a student must give notice and provide proper documentation from the Office of Disability Support Services, Marvin Center 436. Accommodations will be made based upon recommendations of the DSS Office.