Choosing the Right Assessment Method:
Capstone or Final Project

Definition:
Capstone courses can provide unique opportunities for students to demonstrate their knowledge and abilities. For academic programs were a single capstone course is not feasible or desirable, a department may designate a small group of courses where competencies of completing majors will be measured. The capstone or final projects that result from these courses can be powerful assessment tools.

The capstone or final project method integrates knowledge, concepts, and skills associated with an entire sequence of study in a course.

Since student capstone projects vary in nature, it is recommended that faculty use standardized rubrics across all sections of a capstone course or sequence of courses. This practice affords faculty with clear guidelines about departmental standards and expectations, what content to emphasize, and the level of difficulty expected for each topic.

Advantages:

- Cumulative; can measure growth overtime in regards to a major, course, or program.
- The data is highly robust if all students in the sample of sections complete the same assessment.
- Capstone projects yield results that examine students’ cumulative knowledge, skills, and abilities better than exam questions.
- Provides an additional buffer between student learning performance and an individual instructor’s teaching performance.

Disadvantages:

- May result in additional course requirements.
- Requires coordination and agreement on standards.
- May be difficult to analyze assessment results because of all the variables involved in the project.

Ways to Reduce Disadvantages:

- Utilize portfolios from only a sample of students and not all students in all sections or courses participating.
- Have more than one faculty member who scores the projects and establish inter-rater reliability so that the faculty are scoring the projects in the same way.
- Recognize that portfolios are likely to represent the students’ best work.