

**SCHOOL OF PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION
UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA AT OMAHA
PA 8990, CAPSTONE PROJECT IN PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION
FALL 2025**

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Course Description

The Capstone Project offers each student the opportunity to demonstrate mastery of the theory and practice of public administration by applying the knowledge and skills gained in the MPA program to a project of the student's choice. This involves completing a project report reflecting the cumulative knowledge gained from these experiences. The course is intended only for students who are completing their Masters of Public Administration (MPA). The course prerequisite is PA 8120 (Research Methods) or its equivalent, the completion of 30 hours in the MPA program, and School permission.

Course Objectives

- To demonstrate knowledge gained throughout the MPA program and to apply that knowledge to a relevant public management, nonprofit management, or policy problem.
- To produce a report that demonstrates critical thought, exhibits a level of analysis appropriate to a master's degree, and displays a high level of professionalism and competence in presentation.
- To assess the effectiveness of the MPA program in achieving its mission, goals and objectives.

Evaluation

The class will be graded on a satisfactory/unsatisfactory basis. Each student will complete a written report of their project and will make an oral presentation of the project to other members of the Capstone course. Participation at all sessions is required. Timely completion of each assignment according to the course schedule listed below is **required** for the student to continue on to the next phase of the project. Students who fall behind in the course or whose work is not deemed to be sufficiently completed at each stage will not receive a passing grade in the course. Students who are unable to complete their project, but have been both timely and maintained good-faith efforts to complete each phase of their project, may be approved by the professor to receive a grade of "IP" (in progress) at the end of the semester. This grade requires professor approval.

Consistent with the competencies-based MPA curriculum, the following rubric will be the basis for assigning the final pass/fail grade. **Students are expected to demonstrate at least an acceptable level of competence in each of the identified six criteria. This means that for students to pass this course, you cannot receive a score of one in any of the six assessments and, by definition, your cumulative score must be greater than 12.**

Course Competencies Assessment

Assessment Criteria	Assessment Tool(s)	Level of Achievement		
		Needs Improvement	Acceptable	Outstanding
To Analyze, Synthesize, Think Critically, Solve Problems and Make Decisions				
a. Ability to design, execute and assess research	This is the essence of the Capstone project. Assessment will be based on the final paper submitted at the end of the course.	1	2	3
b. Ability to select and utilize analytical tools for collecting, analyzing, synthesizing, interpreting and presenting data to solve problems and/or make decisions.	Students have been exposed to a number of analytical tools throughout their time in the MPA Program. Appropriateness of the chosen analytical tool and demonstrated mastery of the tool will be the basis of the methodology section of the Capstone paper.	1	2	3
c. Demonstrate the ability to think and write critically and analytically, substantiating assertions with appropriate evidence.	Writing quality, as defined in this assessment, requires students to demonstrate the ability to effectively think and write critically. Key elements in the Capstone paper include the stated research question, analytical framework, findings and conclusion sections.	1	2	3
To Articulate and Apply a Public Service Perspective				
a. Understand the context (pol., econ., legal, history, cult.) of public and NP orgs. And the foundations of public service (incl. the normative principles, practices and values of public service) and how the public service fits in a democracy (e.g., the relationships between. pub. servants and elected officials and citizens) and the evolution of the contexts of pub. service over time (e.g., the increasing interconnectedness of the sectors and providing services thru decen. collab. arrangements	The ability to put capstone projects, which tend to be case studies of particular entity at a particular point in time, into a broader theoretical and public service context	1	2	3
Communicate and Interact Productively with a Diverse and Changing Workforce and Citizenry				
a. Ability to communicate effectively thru writing, speaking, discussion, self-reflection and self-knowledge.	The Capstone projects and presentations capture the essence of this assessment	1	2	3
b. Ability to choose and use appropriate tools and technologies to effectively and inclusively communicate (such as explaining information and processes) with diverse groups, including but not limited to citizens, the media, elected officials, and other stakeholders.	Focus on the presentation: limited "jargon"; presentation is clear and concise; the presentation is effectively delivered with the use of charts, graphs, etc.	1	2	3
	Total Score			
	Pass Score: a minimum score of 2 in each of the 6 competencies			

Student Presentations

An important element of the Capstone competencies is the student presentations. Students will need to be prepared to present to a panel of public service professionals who are alums of the UNO MPA Program. The panelists will be tasked with evaluating the presentations as well as providing valuable feedback to the presenters. Treat the presentation like a job talk. It is important to know that while the presentations will be evaluated by the panelists, those evaluations will not be part of the student's

grade, rather the evaluations will be used to help assess Program competencies. **The student's grade is solely the responsibility of the instructor.**

Possible Project Approaches

- Case study
- Action research
- Program evaluation
- Management analysis study
- Policy analysis study
- Work process analysis/process improvement
- Organizational analysis
- Strategic plan

Possible Project Techniques/Methodologies

- Surveys
- Content analysis
- Interviewing
- Cost/benefit analysis
- Focus groups
- Performance measurement
- Forecasting
- Observation
- Quantitative data analysis

Project Outline

Regardless of the project approach and methodology used, the final project should explicitly apply concepts drawn from MPA course work, reading and practice that aid in understanding the political, social, economic, managerial other factors relevant to the context and issues of the project. The outcome should be improved understanding of professional practice in a public or non-profit organization or program. The project may also result in recommendations for action that could change an organization or program.

All materials will be transmitted to the professor electronically in attached files readable by Word. Format will be Times New Roman 12 point font, single-spaced. Receipt will be acknowledged within 24 hours.

Each student's final product will be a report divided into seven sections as described below.

1. Executive Summary: Written when all other sections of the report are completed, this section provides the reader an overview of sections of the paper below.

2. Introduction: Describes the issue studied, including its development over time and the political and organizational context (or other relevant context such as public health). Describes the relevance or significance of the issue, problem, or project. Presents a concise and clear statement of the research question, as well as the likely outcome(s) of not addressing the issue/problem.

3. Analytic Framework/Literature Review: Presents a full and balanced review of theoretical and practice-oriented concepts drawn from the appropriate scholarly and professional literature, comparing and contrasting different perspectives and analyzing their application to the research question. This is sometimes referred to as the “literature review.” The purpose of a review of previous research and various theoretical approaches to a topic is to develop an analytic framework that establishes the elements of the project, lays out the theoretical basis of the project, and integrates the project into the larger body of systematic knowledge about public management and public policy. The References section (see #7 below) should be turned in at the same time as this section. **Please remember, this section is not simply a summary of scholarship related to your research question, rather it is meant to help you frame your research question, identify shortcoming in the existing research and serve as a guide for your methodological approach.**

4. Methodology: Articulates specific research questions/hypotheses and describes the research methodology, such as selection of persons interviewed, use of survey techniques, or data analysis. Carefully describes the specific steps taken to ensure the validity of the research design or project methodology and the credibility and utility of the research results.

5. Findings: Describes findings relative to the hypotheses or research questions with analysis and interpretation of the data or evidence collected.

6. Conclusion: Discusses the potential impact of the research on practice and the public interest. Relates the findings to previous research and existing theory and practice. Identifies shortcoming in research design and identifies areas for future research (if resources or time weren’t issues, what would be an ideal research design). Presents **implications and recommendations** derived from the findings as appropriate.

7. References: A complete and accurate list of references *must* be included, in the style of the American Psychological Association *Publication Manual*.

8. Tables: A departure from the style guide will be that all tables, figures and graphics should be included in the body of the report as close as possible to the text discussion of the item. Please also make sure that you reference the tables in the text.

9. Appendices: Appendices may be used to include lengthy and detailed material not directly discussed in the body of the report. This might include material such as transcripts of in-depth interviews, frequency distributions of survey items, and special computations related to the project (e.g., details of a benefit/cost analysis).

When submitting each section, please submit all prior sections so that I may examine the continuity among the sections.

Selected Resource Materials (do not hesitate to use the UNO and UNMC libraries)

I strongly encourage you to check out Umberto Eco’s “How to Write a Thesis”. Here is an audiobook preview of the book (54 minutes): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ALFH9tG06RQ>. It is also available via Amazon for about \$14: <https://www.amazon.com/How-Write-Thesis-MIT-Press/dp/0262527138>

- Howard S. Becker, *Writing for Social Scientists: How to Start and Finish Your Thesis, Book or Article*, The University of Chicago Press, 1986.
- Chris Hart, *Doing a Literature Review: Releasing the Social Science Research Imagination*, Sage Publications, 1998.
- Terry E. Hedrick, Leonard Bickman, & Debra J. Rog, *Applied Research Design: A Practical Guide*, Sage Publications, 1993.
- Earl Babbie, *The Practice of Social Research*, eight edition, Wadsworth Publications, Inc., 1998.
- Chava Frankfort Nachmias and David Nachmias, *Research Methods in the Social Sciences*, fifth edition, St. Martin's Press, 1996.
- Joseph S. Wholey, Harry P. Hatry, and Kathryn E. Newcomer (Eds.), *Handbook of Practical Program Evaluation*, Jossey-Bass, 1994.
- John Brewer & Albert Hunter, *Multimethod Research: A Synthesis of Styles* Sage, 1989.
- Glen H. Elder, Jr., Eliza A. Pavalko and Elizabeth Colerick Clipp, *Working with Archival Data*, Sage, 1993.
- Gudmund R. Iversen, *Contextual Analysis*, Sage, 1991.
- Jordon J. Louviere, *Analyzing Decision-Making*, Sage, 1984.
- Jean M. Converse and Stanley Presser, *Survey Questions*, Sage, 1986.
- Kazuo Yamaguchi, *Event History Analysis*, Sage, 1991.
- Arlene Fink, *Conducting Research Literature Reviews*, Sage, 1998.
- Arlene Fink and Jacqueline Kosecoff, *How to Conduct Surveys*, 2nd edition, Sage, 1998.
- Robert K. Yin, *Case Study Research*, 2nd edition, Sage, 1994.
- Also a dictionary, a thesaurus, and a writer's guide/college-level English composition text.

Course Procedures and Expectations

In accordance with policy established by the School of Public Administration MPA Committee, the Capstone Project course has **three mandatory meetings**: (1) an initial orientation session early in the semester, (2) a milestone meeting in the middle of the term at a date specified by the professor and (3) the final session at which students present their projects. Each student will work independently, and since the project is intended to represent the culmination of the student's work in the MPA program, each student will be responsible for designing and conducting all aspects of the project.

During the semester the professor will be available as a coach, mentor, and resource person. In particular, the professor will review a written draft of each principal section of the student's report and provide detailed comments and suggestions to the student. Once the professor reviews a given draft section of the report, the student should use the comments and suggestions in the development and preparation of the final report. The professor will generally not review and comment on a student's completed revision of a given section; it is the student's responsibility to make appropriate revisions and to integrate each section into a final written report.

The student is expected to conduct research that meets professional standards for quality and validity. The report is expected to meet professional standards for writing and style. The oral report may be

presented using handouts, overhead transparencies, or software such as PowerPoint, and will last approximately 10-15 minutes. Detailed instructions will be provided later in the semester.

Because of the independent nature of the capstone project, much communication between students and the professor will be by e-mail or telephone. Draft sections for review should be sent to the professor by virus-free e-mail attachment in Word format to the address given at the top of the syllabus, by the date and time indicated on the course schedule listed below. Students may also discuss their project in a telephone call with the professor or may arrange an appointment at a mutually convenient time.

Making Capstone Papers Available to Future Students. The School has decided that we will be retaining successfully completed Capstone projects for review, upon request, by future students in the MPA Program. We realize that in some cases these projects can deal with sensitive material and, therefore, we ask that you notify the instructor if you prefer that your Capstone project not be shared.

Course Schedule

<i>Due Date</i>	<i>Activity /Assignment</i>
Monday, August 25 5:30-7:00 pm	INITIAL ORIENTATION MEETING: Be prepared to give a brief (less than 5 minutes) presentation of your proposal noting what the problem is, why it is important, and how you expect to deal with it. Come to the class with any questions you might have about the course.
September 8 By midnight	INTRODUCTION: Submit the “Introduction” section of the project. Length should be 1-2 single-space pages.
September 29 By midnight	ANALYTIC FRAMEWORK/LITERATURE REVIEW: Submit the “Analytic Framework” and “References” sections of the project (in addition to the introduction; always include the previous sections with your submission). Length should be 5-7 pages.
October 13-14 I will be scheduling 30 minute face-to-face (or on-line) with students.	MILESTONE MEETING: At this meeting, we will review current status of projects and discuss problems, if any. Students should come to the meeting prepared to discuss their planned methodologies. Students are expected to be familiar with the material covered in the research methods course, and the other required core PA courses.
November 10 By midnight	METHODOLOGY: Submit a clear, detailed statement of the project’s hypothesis(es) or research question as developed from the analytic framework; describe the research approach, design, or strategy to be used, the type of data to be collected (that will allow for the test of the hypotheses or will answer the research questions), the sampling procedures, if used, and the specific methods of data collection (e.g., draft interview or survey questions). Length should be 3-5 pages.
November 24 By midnight	FINDINGS, CONCLUSIONS, AND SUMMARY: Submit three items. First, a description and explanation of the research results. Length will vary depending on use of tables and figures; text alone should be 2-5 pages. Second, a concluding discussion of the project’s findings or results as related to the analytic framework, also presenting implications and recommendations; length should be 1-3 pages. Third, an executive summary of the project and report; length should be one page.
December 7 1:00 – 5:00 pm	PRESENTATIONS: Specific guidance on presentations will be provided later in the semester. Projects may be grouped in panels, with practitioners and/or faculty members invited to participate as respondents.
December 16 By midnight	FINAL PAPER DUE: Submit the entire revised paper.
December 16 By midnight	EXIT SURVEY: An MPA exit survey will be sent to you before the end of the semester. Completion of the survey will be a mandatory course assignment. Details will be provided during the semester.
December 16 By midnight	Post-Test of Program Competencies

WRITING GUIDE

Problem areas

- Generally, avoid first-person narrative and familiar, “we” or “you” language, such as “now that we understand ethics,” or “how do you understand ethics?”
- Avoid contractions.
- Note that “it’s” means only “it is,” and is not used for any other meaning.
- Punctuation.
 - Period and comma always appear before quotation marks, except when a parenthetical citation ends the sentence; then, the period is outside the citation.
 - Question mark, colon, semi-colon appear outside quotation marks (though a question mark appears inside the quotation mark if it applies to the quote, not the full sentence).
 - Quotation marks are double, not single, except for a quote within a quote.
- Quotations 40 or more words in length appear in block format. There are no quotation marks in block quotations except for quotes within the quote. The final period appears at the end of text, not outside a parenthetical citation.
- Avoid sentence fragments. Sentences must have a subject (noun clause) and predicate (verb clause) [predicate: proclaim, preach]. Example: “The governing body should create agency mission and goals statements. Also ensure that they are implemented” (no subject). To correct, delete period, change “Also” to “and.”
- Avoid exaggerated language such as “extremely,” “very,” or “enormous,” unless the circumstances described are in fact quite different from others.
- Avoid absolute or normative language such as “must,” “should,” “necessary,” or “required,” unless paraphrasing others or presenting a strongly supported argument involving no, or demonstrably undesirable, alternatives.
- Avoid re-creating lists from the work of others. They are usually a waste of space; briefly summarize their content in narrative form.
- In general, do not use dictionary definitions. Develop description and definitions from course-related source materials.
- Do not anthropomorphize. For example: “The welfare program believed that....” Programs cannot “believe”; employees in the program may do so.
- Miscellaneous items of spelling and word usage:
 - affect = verb, to influence or noun, emotion; effect = verb, to bring about or noun, a result or impact
 - ies/y's (agency's, possessive; agencies, plural)
 - moot (lacking practical significance)/mute (unable to speak)
 - populace (people living in an area)/populous (many people in an area)
 - principle (idea)/principal (first, primary)
 - separation/seperation (second e is incorrect)
 - tenet (principle)/tenant (occupant in building)
 - there (location)/their (plural possessive)
 - the word “data” is a plural form, thus: “data are,” not “data is”; “the data show,” not “the data shows”
- Avoid pointless, redundant words that do not contribute to meaning. Examples (there are valid uses for these, but usually they are pointless and redundant):
 - “in order” “
 - in which”

- “does,” as in, “the author does present evidence for....”
- Avoid colloquialism, instead writing exactly what is meant in plain, clear language.
 - “goes on to say” (referring to additional thoughts from the same author; alternatives include simply quoting what the author writes, or use phrases such as: _____ also writes that, “....”)
 - “looks at” (alternatives: “examines,” “explores,” “discusses”)
 - “the cards are on the table”
 - “sticks out in my mind” (alternative: “seems important”)
 - “sat down to a meeting” (alternative: “met”)
 - “what is the next step?” (referring to preferred next concepts addressed in a paper, or actions to be taken by academicians or practitioners)
 - “take a hold of”
 - “come up with” (alternatives: “create,” “produce,” “build,” etc.)
 - “the author talks about” or “says” (alternatives: “writes about,” “states,” “argues”)
- Do not overuse quotation, which should be a small percentage of the text of a paper. Quotations should be explained and interpreted in surrounding text.
- The best written work is much like speech. Envision presenting your paper before an audience, for example a class, making good eye contact, speaking clearly, and giving emphasis where appropriate. Read your written work aloud, then make changes when you hear language that is awkward, unclear, confusing. Do the sentences as written flow well and make sense? Is each paragraph a complete thought composed of related sentences? Is the work interesting and its meaning clear?
- Never under any circumstances discuss, paraphrase or quote the work of others without giving proper and thorough attribution (parenthetical citations and reference-list entries), and placing quotation marks around all direct quotations. Failure to properly attribute is plagiarism. The result can be failure for the assignment and possibly failure of the course and removal from the program.

APA

- Attribution: give in-text references when using ideas of others or quoting. All direct quotation is in quotation marks with page citation.
- For this course, show page number(s) in parenthetical references unless referring to entire work (APA sec. 3.39, p. 121; and 3.101, pp. 213-214). Page #s indicated by “p.” for one page, “pp.” for two or more.
- Reference list style: capitals are used in book and article titles only for first word, proper names, first word in sub-title following colon.
- Titles in text: first letter of each word of book titles capitalized, title in italics; article titles also in caps, quotation marks, no italics.
- Page numbers in the 6th edition of the *APA Publication Manual* for guidance on commonly used items.
 - parenthetical in-text citations, pages 207+
 - reference list entries for journal articles, pages 239+
 - ref. list, books, pages 248+
 - ref. list, electronic sources, pages 120 and 268+
 - block quotations, pages 117-118
- In APA, journal issue # is not given if the volume is numbered continuously.
- Online retrieval need not be shown when the source is in PDF format.
- See APA for block quotation format, use of italics, ellipsis points, etc.