

# **Undergraduate and Graduate Capstone Courses in HR: A Comparative Analysis**

**Marc C. Marchese**  
King's College

**Steven J. Lorenzet**  
Kean University

## **ABSTRACT**

*Capstone courses in HR have received scant attention in HR journals. This paper begins with a review of capstone courses with a primary focus on capstone courses in business. Based upon this review, research questions were formulated to guide an analysis of HR capstone course syllabi at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. This analysis of HR capstone course syllabi leads to several main conclusions. First, undergraduate and graduate HR capstone courses are quite similar. HR capstone courses are also comparable to capstone courses in other business fields. However, there are considerable differences in the topics covered, teaching methods used, and delivery approaches employed across these courses. The prevalence of HR capstone courses was also examined. HR capstone courses appear to be more commonly found in graduate HR programs than in undergraduate HR programs.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Capstone courses are intended to be the final course in a major that capitalize on previous coursework in a cumulative and integrative fashion. These courses exist in virtually all academic disciplines. The challenge for faculty teaching these courses is determining the content of these courses to maximize the value of the course for the students. In addition, other forces can impact the student requirements included in this course (e.g., a college-wide assessment program). The intent of this paper is to review the business literature on capstone courses and present data on undergraduate and graduate human resources capstone courses. Research on human resources capstone courses is extremely limited.

In the business literature there are articles that highlight the objectives of capstone business courses. As an example, Thomas (1998) identified the five primary objectives of business capstone courses: (1) integration of functionally specific knowledge; (2) understanding the “big picture;” (3) working in, managing and leading a team;

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(4) enhancement of comprehension and communication skills; and (5) ability to assess the applicability and relevance of strategic management research. In addition to these objectives, the article identified common teaching methods present in capstone courses: traditional case studies, role plays, partnering students with local organizations (living cases), article critique assignments, storytelling, and computer-based simulations and games.

Other researchers have examined how capstone courses are delivered. For example, Sonner (1999) compared capstone courses delivered in the traditional classroom format to a variety of distance learning formats. His paper suggested that students were able to learn and apply key concepts at least as well in a distance learning format than a traditional onsite format.

More recent articles from the business literature have linked the business capstone course to AACSB accreditation. Payne, Flynn and Whitfield (2008) indicated that capstone business courses can be a critical component for an AACSB-accredited institution to help meet the Assurance of Learning Standards (AoL). Gilinsky and Robinson (2008) presented a framework for developing a business capstone course that is designed to enhance students' information competency skills. In this article they make a strong connection between information competency skills and the objectives of AACSB's AoL Standards 18 and 19. A specific example of linking a business capstone course and AACSB accreditation can be found in an article by Aurand and Wakefield (2006). They present a capstone marketing course in which students use peer evaluations as a central component of the course. According to the authors this use of peer evaluations enhances the students' learning experiences as well as supports AACSB's AoL standards to promote collaborative learning.

Although there does not appear to be a journal article dedicated to HR capstone courses, there has been one research paper on HR courses that target a certain topical area related to capstone courses. Chadwick (2005) examined HR syllabi at the graduate and undergraduate levels for strategic human resource management (SHRM). From his examination of syllabi from 34 universities, he concluded that strategy does not receive a great deal of attention in many HR programs. Although the focus of this research was not on HR capstone courses, the paper implies that this could be an area to be strengthened in HR capstone courses.

Outside of the business education literature there has been considerable research on capstone courses and capstone experiences. Some of these articles are specific to a component of the capstone course. For example, an article in a civil engineering journal focuses on using the capstone course to help local community organizations (Padmanabhan & Katti, 2002). As service learning gains more prominence in our institutions, projects such as this will be more commonplace in business capstone courses as well.

Other articles relate more to the goals and methods used in capstone courses. Rosenberry and Vicker (2006) provide a review of capstone courses in mass

communication. Similar to the Thomas (1998) article mentioned above, many of the same objectives are present in the typical mass communication capstone course. This article further adds “career preparation” as an additional element in capstone courses in this academic discipline.

A relatively recent article by Kerrigan and Jhaj (2007) presents some characteristics of an exemplary capstone course. This course required students to apply communication and critical thinking skills, and demonstrate ethical/social responsibility and an appreciation of diversity. The course also included three formal assessment strategies (both qualitative and quantitative) to improve the quality of the capstone course.

Others articles have examined the use of capstone courses to assess the quality of the students’ undergraduate education (Berhelde, 2007; Sullivan & Thomas, 2007). One of these articles reported that about half of colleges/universities use capstone courses as part of the institution’s assessment program. In addition, smaller colleges and universities are more likely to use capstone courses for assessment than larger universities (Berhelde, 2007). Moreover, many institutions will encourage their students to submit their major projects in the capstone course for presentation at conferences for external validation of the quality of their work (Berhelde, 2007; Sullivan & Thomas, 2007). Overall, these researchers conclude that capstone courses are useful for assessing the effectiveness of a major and a general education program.

Based upon this literature review and the dearth of research on HR capstone courses, the intent of this paper is to address numerous issues and questions regarding HR capstone courses. For example, does the typical HR capstone course:

- Include strategic HR as a topic?
- Develop communication and critical thinking skills?
- Provide career counseling to our students?
- Include components of a college-wide assessment program?
- Utilize various teaching methods to encourage collaborative learning?
- Include components for maintaining AACSB accreditation in the context of assurance of learning (AoL)?
- Clearly capitalize on other business and/or general education courses?
- Incorporate international/globalization into course content?

## **REVIEW OF HR CAPSTONE COURSES**

To answer the questions posed above, we sought to collect syllabi from existing HR capstone courses. To this end, we posted an e-mail to the HRDIV\_NET, which is the listserv for the HR division of the Academy of Management, requesting a copy of the syllabus for HR capstone courses taught by subscribers to the listserv. Our request was specific to HR capstone courses and included both undergraduate and graduate courses. We also went to the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) web site (<http://www.shrm.org/Education/hrededucation/Pages/universities.aspx/>) and made an e-

mail list of all the undergraduate and graduate programs in Human Resource Management that meet SHRM curriculum standards. We used that list as a follow up to our initial e-mail request to the HRDIV\_NET listserv. The end result of our e-mail requests was a total of twelve syllabi (7 undergraduate, 5 graduate).

We also received two undergraduate syllabi that were advanced HR courses, but were not part of a major or program. One was not a capstone course; one was a true integrative capstone, so it was included in our review, bringing our total to thirteen syllabi (8 undergraduate, 5 graduate). Since we had similar numbers of undergraduate and graduate syllabi, we chose to analyze them separately.

The undergraduate sample syllabi came from three public institutions and five private institutions (one Catholic). Two of the schools held AACSB Business accreditation, three held AACSB Business and Accounting accreditation and three were not accredited by AACSB. The graduate sample consisted of syllabi from three public institutions and two private institutions (one Catholic). Two of the schools held AACSB Business accreditation, one held both Business and Accounting accreditation, and two were not accredited by AACSB. The syllabi came from small, medium, and large schools and although most schools were teaching schools, there were schools included that have a substantial research focus as part of the institution's mission. While we would have preferred that the response rate and sample were larger, we were fortunate that the responses we received represented a reasonable cross-section of higher education institutions, thus increasing the likelihood the syllabi we reviewed are a reasonable approximation of capstone courses found in most undergraduate and graduate HR programs.

### **UNDERGRADUATE HR CAPSTONE COURSES**

Our review of undergraduate syllabi revealed a great deal of overlap and a great deal of variation among HR capstone courses. Table 1 and Table 2 (see Appendix) provide summary information with respect to our research questions, as well as the various modes of delivery. One of the first things we noted was that there were multiple modes of delivery. While in-class delivery was most common, one course was offered purely on-line, while another was offered in hybrid format. Second, five of the eight courses clearly integrated organizational strategy into the course content. Third, all eight courses used methods intended to develop communication skills. This was done in a variety of ways and was aimed at both oral and written communication. Sample methods included: presentations, cases analyses, research papers, group activities, and discussion boards.

All eight syllabi included requirements that promote critical thinking. While there is some debate in the research literature as to the validity of the critical thinking construct (Moore, 2004), we chose to define critical thinking as course components that required the students to conduct in depth analyses and/or develop a strategy for the practical application of course material. With respect to career counseling, only two of the eight courses reviewed explicitly addressed career counseling or career preparation. One

course gave this issue brief attention, while another course listed it as a primary objective and spent considerable time addressing entry into the HR profession. Surprisingly, none of the syllabi made reference to being part of an institution-wide assessment program, or part of an AACSB AoL program.

All courses included various teaching methods that encouraged collaborative learning. Sample methods used to encourage collaborative learning included: facilitated class discussions, on-line discussion boards, debates, group assignments, and case analyses and discussion. Most courses (six out of eight) clearly capitalized on other business coursework, although there was considerable variation, with some relying heavily on prior HR coursework and others only making minimal reference to prior coursework. Two of the courses reviewed did not seem to be based on prior HR coursework. It is also worth noting that there was an even split when it comes to the treatment of international issues. Four of the eight syllabi emphasized international/globalization, while the remaining four did not address international aspects of human resource management.

Overall, our review of undergraduate HR capstone courses revealed that HR capstone courses are quite similar in structure to capstone courses found in other academic disciplines, or degree programs. The only clear exception to this claim is in the area of assessment. As indicated above, none of the syllabi referred to AoL or a college-wide assessment system. As mentioned previously, capstone courses are regularly used for assessment; however it is possible that HR capstone courses are not used for assessment purposes since they are typically a capstone for an HR major within a broader degree program (BBA, BSBA). When one considers that AACSB standards with respect to AoL focus on degree programs, and not specific majors within degree programs, it becomes more apparent why HR capstone courses may not be directly connected to a larger college-wide assessment program. Another potential explanation for this finding is that it is merely an artifact of the data collection method, where the courses are in fact tied to a college-wide assessment program, but it is simply not noted in the syllabi for the courses. Although the course requirements may be used for AoL or college-wide assessment purposes, faculty may not specifically relate this in the syllabus.

### **GRADUATE HR CAPSTONE COURSES**

Similar to the undergraduate syllabi, the graduate HR capstone syllabi had a great deal of overlap, as well as several points of departure (see Tables 1 and 2). With respect to mode of delivery, there was considerable variation. Three of the courses were offered in the traditional in-class format, while one course was offered in hybrid format, and one class was offered as an independent study (thesis style) project. Three of the five courses clearly integrated organizational strategy into the course. One syllabi was composed in such a way that we could not determine if organizational strategy was integrated into the course; however, the book for the course was an HR Strategy book, so we concluded that organizational strategy was integrated into the course, bringing the number of courses that integrated strategy to four.

All five courses used methods aimed at developing communication skills. This was done in a variety of ways, and similar to the undergraduate courses, was focused on both oral and written communication. Sample methods included: papers, presentations, group work, case analyses, and case presentations. Additionally, the course that was offered as an independent study/research project also required students to communicate one-on-one with their faculty advisor and the organization where their study was being conducted. Using our operational definition of critical thinking, all five courses clearly focused on the development of critical thinking skills.

Four of the five syllabi reviewed did not explicitly address career counseling or preparation for entry into the HR profession. There was one notable and innovative exception. One of the courses required student groups to select a well-known public company and then develop a strategic human resource management plan for the company. As part of the project, each student was required to write a cover letter to the CEO of the company his/her group chose explaining what he/she learned about the company. As part of the letter, students were required to provide a rationale to the CEO for why he/she should hire the student into the company's HR Department. The stated goal of this project was to obtain an interview and job offer with the company.

As was the case with the undergraduate capstone courses, none of the syllabi made reference to being part of an institution-wide assessment program, or part of an AACSB AoL program. All courses, with the exception of one, utilized methods that encouraged collaborative learning. Sample methods used to encourage collaborative learning included: group work, interactive class discussions, chapter discussions, case discussions, and case presentations. Not surprisingly, the independent study course was the only capstone course that did not utilize collaborative learning.

All of the course syllabi relied on other business coursework. In all cases, the graduate capstone courses were clearly advanced courses that assumed and relied on prior business coursework as part of the structure of the course. Somewhat surprisingly, it appears that only two of the five courses included a discussion of international aspects of HR. One of the courses that did not cover international/globalization was the independent study/research project. It is our assumption that whether international issues are included in this specific course may in some cases be a function of the topic of study chosen by the student.

Overall, our review of graduate HR capstone courses showed a great deal of similarity to our review of undergraduate HR capstone courses. There were varied forms/modes of delivery, as well as variation in the amount of emphasis placed on organizational strategy. There was a great deal of emphasis placed on critical thinking and communication skills. Likewise, there were several tactics used to promote the development of critical thinking and communications skills. Save for one notable exception, none of the graduate courses emphasized career counseling, or career preparation.

There was no evidence of a direct linkage to a college-wide assessment program. As was possibly the case at the undergraduate level, this may simply be an artifact of the method of data collection. If it is not an artifact and is an accurate reflection of the level of assessment being conducted in graduate HR programs, this raises some concerns. Most notably, AACSB AoL standards require assessment of all degree programs. These courses are capstone courses of graduate degree programs in HR. It is conceivable that AoL is occurring in other part of the degree programs, but it is somewhat surprising not to find evidence of AoL in any of the degree programs' capstone courses.

As was the case with the undergraduate capstone courses, all courses employed methods that encouraged collaborative learning and there was variation in the treatment of international/globalization, with some courses incorporating it and others not incorporating it. One point of departure between graduate and undergraduate courses was the reliance on prior coursework. There was variation among undergraduate courses, while graduate level courses all assumed prior coursework as part of the structure of the courses.

### **PREVALENCE OF HR CAPSTONE COURSES**

In addition to examining the content of HR capstone courses, we also examined the prevalence of HR capstone courses. As indicated previously, at the SHRM website there is a list of undergraduate and graduate programs that meet SHRM educational standards. The vast majority of these programs have hyperlinks to their HR curriculum. We examined 94 undergraduate HR programs and 46 graduate HR programs from this list.

In terms of undergraduate HR programs, only 35 of the 94 colleges/universities (37%) had HR as a major at their institution. The other 59 schools had HR as a component of another major. The most common designation was HR as a specialization of the business administration major. Other schools had HR as a concentration, option or emphasis of a business degree. Of the 35 institutions with HR as a major, only 11 (31%) of these programs had a clearly identifiable HR capstone course. This was a surprisingly and disappointingly low result. We assumed that HR capstone courses would be commonplace in undergraduate HR majors. The most common course title for this capstone course was "Strategic HRM." Of the 59 institutions that had HR as a track within another major, only 9 of these schools (15%) had a clearly identifiable HR capstone course. Overall, it appears that the vast majority of undergraduate HR programs across our country do not have a HR capstone course. This could be another contributing factor to the low sample size of syllabi included in this investigation.

At the graduate level the findings were quite different from the undergraduate analysis. Of the 46 programs listed at the SHRM website, 36 institutions (78%) offered a graduate degree in HR. Generally these degrees were a master's of arts in HR, a master's of science in HR or a master's of HR. Of these 36 programs, 25 (69%) had a HR capstone course as a required part of their curriculum. Similar to the undergraduate review, the most common course title for the capstone course was "Strategic HRM." Of the 10

graduate programs that had HR as a concentration, specialization or something else (e.g., emphasis, option, track) only 1 institution (10%) had a HR capstone course.

In conclusion, the likelihood of a HR student taking a HR capstone course is much greater at the graduate level than the undergraduate level. Moreover, a HR capstone course is unlikely to be found in an undergraduate or graduate program in which HR is a track, specialization, or concentration of another degree. We do, however, acknowledge the limitations of this data collection approach. There were several institutions that provided limited information about their HR program on the web. Thus, it's possible that the percentages reported above underestimate the true percentage of HR capstone courses.

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Overall our investigation into capstone courses from HR programs lead to several issues and questions about the quality of the education our students are receiving across our Country. To begin with, the striking similarities between the syllabi from undergraduate and graduate courses calls into question the real differences between graduate and undergraduate work. How much more valuable is a graduate degree than an undergraduate degree in HR? We acknowledge the possibility that syllabi only present a framework for a course. Thus, graduate courses may address the same topics and have similar requirements as undergraduate courses, but the depth and breadth of these requirements may not be accurately reflected in the syllabi.

In addition, this review of undergraduate and graduate syllabi also revealed a weak commitment to global HR issues. We expected a moderate to weak commitment to global HR issues at the undergraduate level, because it's expected most traditional undergraduates are not likely to have HR jobs with international implications for quite some time. Graduate HR programs however commonly target students with considerably more work experience and higher-level responsibilities. These students are much more likely to be employed in HR jobs that could have international requirements.

On a positive note, the majority of both undergraduate and graduate HR capstone courses showed a commitment to strategic human resources management. As mentioned earlier, Chadwick (2005) indicated that strategic issues were undervalued in most HR programs. It's possible that over the past several years, the attention to strategy has been increased significantly.

The last area to be addressed in this review is the lack of attention to any form of assessment for college-wide purposes or for AACSB-accreditation purposes. As mentioned previously, we speculated that many faculty do not believe specific references to assessment in the syllabus are necessary. In theory, assessment is supposed to be a quality improvement process. If this really is the purpose of assessment programs, one can easily argue that we should share this information with our students. We could send the message that we are monitoring and committed to improving the quality of the education they receive at this institution. These capstone courses are critical in this



assessment process. We advocate that HR faculty should reconsider inserting assessment purposes in their syllabi.

As indicated previously, there are no published articles on capstone courses in the HR literature. Hopefully, this paper will alert HR educators to many issues surrounding capstone courses. However, this investigation has one major drawback: a small sample size. Although our sample did come from a variety of higher education institutions, the conclusions drawn could be questioned as a result of the limited number of responses. In our data collection, we did contact over a 100 institutions with HR programs. Thus, the low response rate could partially be a function that many HR programs lack a capstone course, as indicated previously. We did receive numerous emails to this effect. The other explanation is that some of our colleagues did not want to share (or make the effort to share) their syllabi. For HR education to grow and prosper, HR faculty need to be more receptive to participating in pedagogical research. Our students and our profession will benefit in the long run.

In conclusion, this investigation identified several important issues that should be considered when creating and revising capstone courses in HR. We firmly believe more research in this area would enhance our discipline and ultimately improve the quality of education for our students.

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**Marc Marchese** is a professor of HRM at King's College. He regularly teaches the introductory HRM course at the undergraduate and graduate levels, employee training and development, employee selection, and the HR capstone course. He received his Ph.D. from Iowa State University. Contact: [marcmarchese@kings.edu](mailto:marcmarchese@kings.edu).

**Steven J. Lorenzet** is acting dean and an associate professor of HRM in the Nathan Weiss Graduate College at Kean University. His research interests include training and development, leadership, and performance measurement. He received his Ph.D. from the University at Albany, State University of New York. Contact: [slorenze@kean.edu](mailto:slorenze@kean.edu).

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## APPENDIX

**Table 1. Summary of Mode of Delivery**

	Undergraduate	Graduate
In-class	6	3
On-line	1	0
Hybrid	1	1
Independent study	0	1

**Table 2. Summary of Syllabus Review**

	Undergraduate		Graduate	
	Yes	No	Yes	No
Strategic HRM as a topic	5	3	4	1
Develop communication skills	8	0	5	0
Develop critical thinking skills	8	0	5	0
Provide career counseling	2	6	1	4
Part of college-wide assessment	0	8	0	5
Encourage collaborative learning	8	0	4	1
Part of assurance of learning	0	8	0	5
Capitalize on other business and/or gen ed courses	6	2	5	0
Incorporate international/globalization	4	4	2	3