Communication Studies: Culminating Masters Project

Every CST M.A. or M.S. student not choosing the Masters Thesis option must successfully complete an individual culminating research project during one of the student's final two semesters in the program in order to earn the degree.

Within the context of a particularly chosen course, each student crafts an original culminating Masters project paper and oral presentation that integrate key aspects of the student's graduate learning in communication studies and showcase the student's skilled achievement of CST graduate learning outcomes. The goal of the culminating research project is to demonstrate a graduate student's ability to engage in significant, independent research at an advanced level. Culminating research projects thus should merit wider dissemination as refereed conference presentations or journal or book chapter publications. They benefit graduates by offering a final opportunity to hone specific CST knowledge and master the analytic tools and subject matter expertise most relevant to it.

Two Paths through the CST Graduate Culminating Project process

Immediately prior to the student's final year in the program, each CST graduate student commits to completing a culminating project within a course that supports such projects. Students each respond to a late-summer email from the CST chair or graduate program director, which offers the coming year's culminating project course choices and solicits each student's commitment to a particular course for their project during the year ahead. **CST students select their culminating project course in one of two ways:**

Guided by their specializations within the discipline, a graduate student can take a particular CST course offered fall or spring term whose 'built-in' final research project qualifies as a CST culminating project-level assignment for that specialty within CST. Although each course's availability depends on established course rotations, the CST 5XX courses with 'built-in' culminating project ability include:

- **CST 535** Advanced Visual Persuasion, **CST 540** Broadcast Criticism, or **CST 545** Cinema and Society for CST graduate degrees focused on rhetoric and media;

- **CST 552** Public Affairs Reporting or **CST 553** Multimedia Journalism for CST graduate degrees focused on journalism;

- **CST 534** Organizational Communication in Natural Settings for CST graduate degrees focused on organizational communication and other non-mediated communication phenomena.

(*Note: additional CST courses may join this 'default' list as their syllabus-given major course assignments are shown to fit CST criteria distinguishing culminating project-level work.)

Or, rather than opt for one of the three types of 'default' culminating project courses, a graduate student with a specific project in mind instead can approach a particular CST professor to propose a carefully outlined culminating project to complete under their supervision within a qualifying CST 5XX course offered during that coming academic year. Professors choose before fall term commences whether or not to accept each such proposal. With CST faculty workload equity and other professional concerns in mind, each CST professor will supervise only a very limited number of these 'directed study'-type culminating projects in a given year. Oversubscribed professors will direct students

beyond that limit either to one of the 'built-in' culminating project courses or to another faculty member supervising fewer such directed study-type culminating projects that year.

A graduate student's culminating project proposal in all cases must fit criteria that describe the scope and rigor that distinguish this level of assignment. Any culminating project:

- Involves relatively independent student work (with faculty consultation) that synthesizes threads of a communication specialty driven by the student's intrinsic interest;

- Significantly increases students' content knowledge and analytic ability in a chosen area;

- Offers strong justifications and review of existing research to frame the analysis or RQ / hypothesis (if a study);

- Utilizes appropriate accepted methodologies (including validated rather than ad hoc measures if a survey-based study);

- Utilizes existing research and theory rather than speculation to anchor discussion and extrapolation from results (if a study);

- Produces a portfolio-worthy product that helps launch the student toward a post-graduation goal;

- Has a speaking/oral component to its presentation.

Every CST culminating project product each term "goes public"

… in written form…

After the project's write-up is completed and has been graded by its supervising professor, each student then sends that professor a closely edited final electronic version of the paper to be archived within the searchable "CST 4XX Capstone & Culminating Projects" database maintained by UP's Clark Memorial Library:

(http://clark.up.edu/search/r?SEARCH=cst+4xx). Each student agreeing to archive her/his paper in this database must add the following text to that final revision's cover page:

"I understand that in the interest of shared scholarship the University of Portland and its agents have the non-exclusive license to archive and make accessible my work in whole or in part in all forms of media in perpetuity. Further, I understand that my work, in addition to its bibliographic record and abstract, may be available to a wider community of scholars and researchers through electronic access."

The student's professor then forwards that final version to UP's librarians, who convert it to pdf format and post that to the electronic reserve for future CST students and others to search and consult.

… and in oral form:

Written work is the primary product of a CST culminating project, but **every such project also is presented orally for an audience.** Many works will be professionally presented for a grade within the classes where they were created. However, **several projects each term are selected for presentation to a wider and more celebratory audience.**

Each semester CST faculty host a "CST Capstone Showcase Night" for the UP campus and wider community. Each 'Showcase' features about 10 of that term's noteworthy CST undergraduate capstone and CST graduate culminating projects, offered as a series of 4-6 minute presentations followed by a period of questions and conversation with the authors. Showcased project authors can choose whether and how best to augment their talks – either simultaneously or afterward – with compelling visual / audio

representations of their capstone project. Oral-only, poster-aided, or projected electronic illustrations all are options. Showcase presenters' choices should reveal skilled rhetorical sensibilities applied to that situation. Any visual aid used must be computer-generated and printed or projected. Capstone Showcase Night each term features substantial food and refreshments; it celebrates a host of accomplishments via awards given by the audience and CST faculty.