**Local Government, SWOT Analysis, and Civic Engagement**

by

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**Abstract**: Political Science departments across the country offer (and often require) a Senior Capstone course as part of the major. The Wahlke Report recommended including such a course almost twenty years ago and the Association of American Colleges and Universities considers it a “high-impact practice.” Colleges and Universities are also advocating broad efforts at civic engagement—an approach to academic work for which political science majors are uniquely qualified. This article recommends a State of the Community project as a best practice for the capstone seminar. It describes the successes and failures of partnering a senior capstone course with seven public agencies in a small city. By developing a multi-stage process for interacting with agencies, city officials, and the public, this State of the Community project provides students with a real-world opportunity to serve as political/organizational consultants. By emphasizing the importance of timeliness, teamwork, community engagement, presentation skills, and professionalism, this project can be a turning point for political science students who must soon transition from being members of the undergraduate world to being citizens in the community around them.

This paper prepared for presentation at the Western Political Science Association Annual Meeting, Hollywood, California, March 28-30, 2013. Copyright by the Western Political Science Association. Please do not cite or distribute without permission from author. An earlier draft of this paper was delivered to the American Political Science Association Teaching & Learning Conference.

**Introduction: An Opportunity and a Challenge**

One fall afternoon the mayor and the assistant city manager of Brintnall approached me with an interesting proposition.[[1]](#endnote-1) They wanted to inaugurate an annual “State of the Community” event and they wondered how Brintnall[[2]](#endnote-2) State students could be involved. Both had professional connections to the University and saw the improvement of town-gown relations as one of the benefits of such a partnership. Fortuitously, I was just beginning the process of developing my senior capstone syllabus for the spring and was looking for an appropriate civic engagement/professionalism component. What follows is a description of the events and assignments that emerged, as well as an analysis of what worked well, what did not, and what might work for others in the future. I hope it can assist faculty in thinking through how to use the senior capstone experience to help students transition from their role as political science majors to democratically engaged, working professionals in the political world.

**Capstone as Stepping Stone**

Political Science departments across the country offer (and often require) a Senior Capstone course as part of the major. The Wahlke Report recommended including such a course over twenty years ago and the Association of American Colleges and Universities considers it a high-impact practice (Wahlke 1991). The capstone course is also seen as an effective site for fulfilling the increasing demands for programmatic assessment (Sum and Light 2010). Colleges and Universities are also advocating broad efforts at civic engagement—an approach to academic work for which political science majors are uniquely qualified. This article recommends a State of the Community project as a best practice for the capstone seminar. It describes the successes and failures of partnering a senior capstone course with seven public agencies in a small city. By developing a multi-stage process for interacting with agencies, city officials, and the public, this State of the Community project provides students with a real-world opportunity to serve as political/organizational consultants. By emphasizing the importance of timeliness, teamwork, community engagement, presentation skills, and professionalism, this project can be a turning point for political science students who must soon transition from being members of the undergraduate world to being citizens in the community around them.

For at least the past two decades, American educators and organizations have focused on how to better prepare college students for their role as engaged citizens (see, for example, efforts by the Pew Partnership for Civic Change and the American Democracy Project). Moreover, engagement in the community has become an increasingly important part of collegiate assessment and evaluation; the Carnegie Foundation now includes Community Engagement as an elective classification.[[3]](#endnote-3) Political Scientists, in particular, have been encouraging the development of programs to address civic engagement and democratic engagement at least since the 1940s (McCartney, Bennion, and Simpson 2013; Ishiyama, Bruening, and Lopez 2006, 662). Civic engagement is defined in various ways, but Thomas Ehrlich provides a typical and useful definition: “Civic engagement means working to make a difference in the civic life of our communities and developing the combination of knowledge, skills, values, and motivation to make that difference. It means promoting the quality of life in a community, through both political and nonpolitical processes. A morally and civically responsible individual recognizes himself or herself as a member of a larger social fabric and therefore considers social problems to be at least partly his or her own” (2000, vi). The related concept of civic literacy is defined as: “the ability of citizens to decide what government *should* be doing, understand what governments *are* doing, and have the skills required so that governments *will* respond appropriately” (Chesney and Feinstein 1997, 2, emphasis in original).

Political scientists face a special challenge when it comes to educating engaged citizens in that we are often expected to address this topic in multiple ways—at both the basic level (suitable for general education courses) and at a more advanced level (suitable for our majors). Previous research has suggested that courses presenting local government civic engagement or community based learning opportunities can be effective in helping students better understand the roles of local governments and the duties of informed citizens (Jackman 2012; van Assendelft 2008). This article suggests that the senior capstone course is one excellent point at which to emphasize the importance of civic engagement and civic literacy in a manner that will be meaningful to our majors as they transition from the classroom to careers. Whether or not political science majors take on careers directly related to the major, their selection of major suggests a civic interest that makes them valuable as potential community leaders in an era where participation in civil society organizations may be on the decline (Putnam 2000). Indeed, experiential learning activities that ask students to confront and interact with their communities in meaningful ways can be crucial to the development of self-efficacy and civic responsibility (see, for example, Bandura 1997).

Beyond the specific concept of civic engagement, the capstone can also play a role in preparing students for the non-collegiate world more broadly. Scholars have noted a need for students to acquire employment-related skills as undergraduates and the benefit of active learning strategies in developing those skills (Peters and Beeson 2010). A secondary benefit of the project described below is that it requires students to engage in many tasks that will likely be a part of their careers: formal and informal written communication, program evaluation, working on multi-person projects, scheduling meetings, giving public presentations, and dressing and speaking professionally. This career focus does not mean, of course, that a capstone course either is or should be merely vocational; a successful capstone grounds these practical skills in a substantive, social science framework.

**Organization of the Project**

As mentioned above, this project began with a meeting between the author and city officials. The mayor and assistant city manager were interested in establishing events that would help the public better understand challenges faced by the community, help community agencies better see their interdependencies, and provide a vantage point from which all those involved could identify solutions to difficult issues. The assistant city manager agreed to serve as a point of contact for the class and, after this meeting, his next task was to identify and secure participation from community partners and to design the format for two State of the Community events. The assistant city manager identified seven government agencies (City of Brintnall, County Board of Supervisors, Brintnall Unified School District, Brintnall State University, County Community College, Brintnall Area Recreation District, and State Senate District 4) that were willing to be a part of this project. We then agreed on a meeting format in which the community agencies would present the results of their self-assessments at a public meeting early in the spring semester and the capstone students would present an action plan for each agency in a second forum near the end of the semester.

We agreed on a schedule in which each of the agencies would provide a written SWOT analysis[[4]](#endnote-4) to the city and the capstone students prior to the first forum and then present their issues at that meeting. The city agreed to advertise the forum as a continued city council meeting in order to make it a public event. The capstone class would attend the first forum in order to learn about the agencies’ issues and meet their agency liaisons.

As the course instructor, my role was to integrate this project into a senior capstone course that is required of all general political science majors at my university.[[5]](#endnote-5) The course typically has between twenty and thirty students, which allowed for the creation of 3-4 member teams. I assigned the teams based on student interest as expressed in a questionnaire distributed on the first day of class. Though the course had a number of assignments in addition to the State of the Community project, students spent time outside of class in the weeks prior to the first public forum meeting getting to know each other, researching the role and structure of their assigned community partner, learning what a SWOT analysis is, and developing questions for their agency liaison.

After the first forum—which was televised on a community access channel and well-attended by members of the community—the student teams faced a number of additional tasks. They were required to meet at least once with a liaison from their partner agency to discuss potential plans and ask additional questions. We also used some class time to ask questions and have inter-team meetings, as part of the assignment required students to develop action items that involved at least one other agency.

The teams each produced two written work products. The first of these was a SWOT Analysis Plan of Action. Here, they summarized the key portions of their community partner’s SWOT analysis and developed three to five action items for agency improvement. The action items needed to address how the agency could capitalize on its strengths and opportunities and/or address weaknesses and threats. These plans needed to be feasible and legal, but did not all have to be implemented during the semester. After turning in this assignment, the teams had to meet again with their community agencies, present their action plans to them, and decide—in collaboration with their agency—on one or more ideas to develop further. Actually implementing one of these ideas became the next part of the project. The action items students chose to pursue included such things as expanding an after school mentoring program for the school district, developing outreach efforts on college campuses for the local recreation district, and creating an internet discussion board for the City of Brintnall.

The second written product—a Community Report—was not due until after the second State of the Community forum. At that event, also held in the city council chamber, each team gave a ten minute presentation that focused on the collaborative implementation of an action item with their community partner and that offered recommendations for the future. The report was not due until one week after the forum so that teams could incorporate feedback from their agencies.

For both written projects, we developed grading rubrics as a class. I started with a basic structure and asked the students to help fill in the component parts of the assignment, relative weights, and examples of strong and weak elements. As this project was entirely new for me, and as the availability and demands of the various community partners required adaptability on the part of the students, this was the most effective approach for helping us all come to a mutual understanding of expectations for the assignments. Feedback from students and community partners and my own reflections led me to some conclusions regarding the project’s successes and failures.

**Benefits and Successes**

In addition to the directly substantive portions of each team’s written assignments, each student was also required to write a 1-2 page reflection paper for both the SWOT Analysis Plan of Action and the Community Report. These reflections, along with class discussions and conversations with the community partners, produced the following observations.

On the positive side, I was impressed with the students’ patience and professionalism. It has been my experience that college students often wear sweatpants to class, drink sodas, and chat/text/sleep if they become disinterested. I presented this observation to the class prior to the first community forum and asked how they thought they should dress and behave at the event. They had a thoughtful conversation about attire and attentiveness and, as a result, every student attended both of the forums and looked and behaved very professionally. Multiple community leaders commented on this to me afterwards. They were particularly impressed by the students’ oral presentations and use of PowerPoint at the second forum. In truth, many of the student presentations were as good as, or better than, those the community partners had given. I feel confident that the students learned an important lesson about professionalism.

A second benefit—and the most substantively important—was the opportunity to practice civic engagement. By employing students in a “real world” task as opposed to a classroom simulation, students had to think through how they might be involved in their community. Many students reflected that this project helped them see how they could put the skills from their major to use. One student noted: “taking the role of someone that actually has a say was a really cool experience.” Another observed: “the greatest strength in this project is the fact that as students, it gives us a chance to actually work on something that can possibly have a impact on our community. This is in contrast to the past 3 years of merely doing assignments and projects out of a hypothetical context or simply in the realm of academia. By introducing us to a situation that is based in reality and not purely academic, with real consequences and rewards, it changed my whole outlook.” All slights to academia aside, it seems very clear that the project had the intended impact in regard to civic engagement.

A related benefit was the opportunity to practice communication skills in the public sphere. Because the students knew that their oral and visual presentation would be before a live public audience and shown on local television, and because their community reports would be available to the public via the City of Brintnall’s website, many students expressed that they saw the assignment as higher stakes than a typical course assignment. This led many to invest more time and effort into the project. As one student observed, presenting his work publically, “was probably one of the greatest experiences I have ever had in college. I truly felt like for the first time in college that I was actually doing something that carried with it some meaning. Being able to address the community on something that we had worked so hard on, and [to] have such a warm response from the community, really made this whole project worth it.”

Students were also led to think concretely about their own careers. By having the opportunity to interact directly with elected and appointed officials, as well as career pubic administrators, the students were able to see that these are regular folks with obtainable careers. Many professionals in the region have degrees from the Brintnall State and this led multiple students to consider public service as a career in a new light. Though students often pursue a degree in political science with dreams of becoming president (or at least a Senator), a career in state or local government is more realistic for many. This activity provided a clear connection between skills and concepts learned in the classroom and their application in the public sphere. A typical student reaction was that “this project has created a lasting image of what the professional world will be like.”

Students also reported positive experiences with the team portion of the project. Typical responses included “it was nice to not have to worry about group members pulling their weight.” My suspicion is that students are often assigned group projects in high school and early in college—at a time when not all of those involved are prepared to take the assignment seriously and when not all are capable of contributing to the same degree. Anticipating grumbling, I included the following statement in the course syllabus: “**Disclaimer**: this is a team project. I know that some of you loathe, fear, etc. ‘group projects.’ The fact of the matter is that most careers require collaborative work from time to time. You don’t always get to choose your team members, and sometimes you are evaluated based on the work of others, in addition to your own contributions.” I believe that confronting student fears up front, as well as including the project in a senior capstone course for majors—where all involved had the ability and incentive to contribute equally—made this element of the project successful.

In addition to these direct benefits that were an intentional part of the assignment, secondary and unplanned benefits emerged as well. For one, several students reported that the community forums allowed their family and friends to see them on television. This was a source of pride for the students, who appreciated the opportunity to put their skills on display and to have a mechanism for sharing with their families what they had been learning in college. Many Brintnall State students are first generation college students and have experienced struggles in relating the importance of what they are doing in school to their parents—particularly given the rapidly rising costs of higher education and the choice of a major whose connection to the job market is not always immediately apparent.

Another secondary benefit was a better understanding of the interdependence of government agencies. The community partners frequently made reference to their interactions with each other (such as conflicts between the city council and the state senator over the elimination of redevelopment agencies). These conversations, in conjunction with the requirement that the student teams meet with each other to hear ideas and look for potential collaborations, helped students see the interconnectedness of public agencies. As one student observed, “another extremely productive step in this process was the forced cooperation between groups. This truly allowed for a great exchange of ideas and helped identify some strengths and weaknesses in our own analysis of our agencies.”

Finally, the project was an opportunity for enhancing relations between the community and the university. Brintnall is a typical college town in that the student population makes up a significant chunk of the population (about 15 percent). The campus also abuts the downtown area and students live predominantly in mixed residential neighborhoods. Such factors can sometimes lead to tensions between the university and a community’s permanent residents, so it was nice to have a positive connection reported in the local media. A student comment puts it best: “the recent community address that our class gave….showed our differing agencies that young people can come up with productive ideas that can potentially better our community.”

**Difficulties and Challenges**

Though this project was successful overall, it also met with its share of challenges. The most significant of these was the inclusion of somewhat uncooperative community partners. While representatives from all of the agencies attended both of the forums and agreed to meet with students at least once, one failed to submit a written SWOT analysis and a couple did not agree to meetings in a timely manner. Though dealing with difficult clients is a realistic learning experience, this experience led to increased stress and difficulty meeting deadlines for one team in particular. One student observed: “while I feel my group ultimately did create a well-rounded concept, the fate of our work lies in the hands of officials who are either unwilling to attempt to implement our idea or incapable of doing so.” My response was to be flexible with due dates and take these challenges into consideration when grading their report, but I suspect that this made the project less positive for the most negatively affected team.

Another set of difficulties had to do with the student composition of the class. Because the political science major at Brintnall State is very flexible, students came into the capstone course having varying backgrounds in terms of coursework and interests, making some better prepared than others to serve as consultants. I tried to compensate for this by allowing students to largely self-select their agencies and by creating teams with a balanced membership. Even so, some teams came into the project better prepared than others. In addition, varying work and class schedules and commuting commitments led to some intra-group frustrations.

Other difficulties affected the entire class. All of the students were graduating seniors, and the combination of a semester-long project and senioritis was sometimes frustrating. I made sure this project wrapped up by the end of April to minimize the effect of students thinking beyond graduation, but there were still times when students missed team meetings due to job interviews (or less laudable endeavors). The fact that all of the students would be leaving the University by the end of May also limited some of the longer term solutions that they might have wanted to pursue. Students expressed frustration that some problems they identified were too big to solve in the scope of the semester, and that they would not be around to see their ideas fully implemented. According to one student, “even though our group would have loved to be able to…solve the City of Brintnall’s budget problems, it was obvious that this was just too big of a task for us to tackle.”

Finally, the project faced some logistical challenges. Because I needed to rely on a partnership with city officials for some aspects of the project, and because this was a new venture for both myself and the city, I ended up devoting too much class time to the project early in the semester, before we confirmed all aspects of the project and had firm dates and expectations from the city. While this was a good lesson in flexibility, it also caused students some stress and frustration that I would have liked to have avoided. As one student noted, “the first few weeks of this project were kind of lost in an abyss of lack of understanding as to what was expected.” Additionally, there has been a problem with follow-up. We embarked on the project with a goal to repeat the event annually and have one year follow-ups with the community partners, but a new mayor, new assistant city manager, and new instructor for the course have made that less likely. As with other aspects of the project, it may simply be necessary to revise expectations and consider the State of the Community as something to revisit every few years, but not annually.

**Future Recommendations**

I believe the State of the Community project was a successful one and a high-impact, active learning practice that could be replicated by other capstone courses. In order to achieve the civic engagement goals and insure a positive experience for students, I recommend a few adjustments and considerations.

First, an instructor interested in pursuing such a project should work to her or his strengths, as well as those of their school and community. I teach State and Local Government. If your field is comparative politics, you may want to approach this altogether differently—perhaps by working with cultural organizations or immigration agencies. I also live in a community that is small enough to make this enterprise appealing to city and regional governments. I expect that communication and coordination obstacles grow with size and that a community of 100,000 can take on projects that might be next to impossible in a major metropolis. Class size, as well, must shape this project, though most capstone seminars are probably reasonably well-suited for this endeavor.

I suspect that this is a project that will be more successful and welcomed by the community the more attention one pays to the needs of the community. For example, agencies might get burned out doing this every year. It might be something to pursue every two to three years. If it is pursued annually, the agencies involved should be rotated. Moreover, having willing and eager community partners is vital. The project requires dedicated contacts, so that the agency is accountable to the community and to the students. A letter from the mayor and a written commitment from the agency, listing the designated liaison, would help insure consistent participation. Another good way to insure agency buy-in is to make sure the project is mutually beneficial. Community partners need to get something out of this in order to justify their participation. Help them see their role as true partners so that they will want to actively participate beyond just answering students’ questions.

Some potential problems can be headed off in the syllabus or through class discussion early in the semester. In order to make sure students make a positive impression on the community, explicitly address formal presentation skills and expectations, possibly including a dry run in class. Students should have the goal of impressing public officials with their professionalism, not disappointing them with their informality. On a related note, consider having an assignment early on that requires teams to learn about their agency so that they will feel confident when they meet with their partner—and the partner will feel confident that the students are not wasting the agency’s time. Having small teams of 2-4 students makes scheduling meetings easier and is probably realistic for future work situations students may encounter. In the future, I would also create a sample SWOT analysis and plan of action for students to see in week one or two so that they have a better sense of where the project is headed. It is also important to make expectations of event attendance clear in the syllabus. I had the fortune of there being an extra “special project” unit attached to the course, which helped to enforce attendance at outside of class activities.

There are also some logistical considerations and coordination issues to which one should be attentive. It would be helpful for the teams to meet with the community partners *before* the first forum so that everyone is clear on what a SWOT analysis is and so that the community agency can present information in a manner that is helpful to the students. Encourage students to be persistent in pestering their agency contacts and in sending them drafts of the project so that the contacts can see how much work students are putting into the endeavor. This may lead to more timely responses and to the partners taking the activity more seriously. It would also be beneficial to make implementation an official component of the Community Report, possibly by having a built-in follow-up component. This could even stretch into future semesters and provide new groups of students with a starting point for the activity. It also makes sense to plan on developing publicity for the public forums. The city did a good job of advertising the first event, but the second had lower attendance. As this was the forum where the students were presenting their work, it would have been nice to have a packed room. Encouraging students from other classes, faculty, student and community journalists, and university officials to attend can also generate broader coverage of the event.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, for this project to be successful one must be flexible. Agencies will change their minds, administrators will change their availability, and students will surprise you by needing less time for some tasks and more for others. As long as an instructor is willing to roll with the punches, the State of the Community project can provide an invaluable civic education for political science students.

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1. Note redacted for anonymity. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. The names of the school and city have been modified throughout to preserve anonymity. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. According to Carnegie (2013): “The purpose of community engagement is the partnership of college and university knowledge and resources with those of the public and private sectors to enrich scholarship, research, and creative activity; enhance curriculum, teaching and learning; prepare educated, engaged citizens; strengthen democratic values and civic responsibility; address critical societal issues; and contribute to the public good.” [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. A SWOT analysis examines an organization’s Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats. It is a standard tool for better understanding a public or private organization’s needs. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. The complete syllabus can be viewed at: (redacted for anonymity). [↑](#endnote-ref-5)