

Professional M.A. Program Capstone Requirements and Guidance

1. Introduction

Students will conduct an independent research project that is designed to apply integrated marine science knowledge to an issue in management, policy, law, business, or education.

The Capstone is intended to fulfill the following goals:

- Demonstrate mastery of academic knowledge of a relevant and important marine science issue and ability to engage with all aspects of research
- Demonstrate competencies in integration of marine science across disciplines and its application to complex management, policy, law, business, or education issues
- Address selected competencies/knowledge/skills/abilities, identified through the student's individual development plan, that will prepare the student to pursue their career goals

2. General guidelines

For the capstone project course, each student works with a VIMS faculty member (Capstone advisor) and a professional mentor to design and conduct a project where integrated knowledge is used to address an area, problem, or issue of consequence at the interface of marine science and environmental or natural resource management, policy, law, business, education, or other areas.

Professional mentors

- The professional mentor should be an individual from the professional field most relevant to the student's capstone project and career aspirations. There are no degree requirements for professional mentors, and qualifications are expected to vary by profession. Professional mentors will be chosen for the skills or connections that they can bring to the project.
- Professional mentors should be selected to complement skills and extend networks created through other parts of the M.A. program, towards the goals students identified in their individual development plans.
- Students, in collaboration with their Capstone Advisor(s) are responsible for finding their own professional mentor; however, the M.A. Program Director and Academic Studies have relationships with many organizations and can help identify appropriate individuals.
- Professional mentors are expected to have an active role in developing and guiding the project and helping to shape the project product. They will also have to sign off on the final product(s) and provide Capstone Advisors with information towards the class grade. Frequency and method of engagement with the student and Capstone Advisor should be defined at the beginning of the project.

Capstone products

- The Capstone prospectus will serve as a vehicle for development of ideas, identification of professional mentors, and agreement between the student, Capstone Advisor (VIMS faculty member), professional mentor, and M.A. program director on what products constitute successful completion of the Capstone project.
- Capstone products will vary by topic and project, but must always demonstrate the understanding and integration of marine science into the final product(s). Capstone products must be approved by the M.A. program director prior to beginning the project.

3. Specific Capstone requirements

- Students will consult with their Capstone Advisor(s) to identify a project topic that addresses an area, problem, or issue of consequence at the interface of marine science and environmental or natural resource management, policy, law, business, education, or other areas. The project may involve new research or independent analysis of information gathered by others.
- Students will identify and connect with a professional mentor in consultation with their Capstone Advisor(s)
- Students will create a Capstone Prospectus in collaboration with their Capstone Advisor(s) and professional mentor which must be reviewed and formally approved by the Capstone Advisor(s), professional mentor, and M.A. program director prior to beginning the project.
- The Capstone Prospectus should be fully approved within the first month of beginning the Capstone course. The prospectus should be around 3 pages, single-spaced and exclusive of figures and references, and should include the following:
 - Advisory team (Capstone Advisor(s), professional mentor)
 - Problem statement including a brief description of the area, problem, or issue of consequence that the Capstone will address; a short review of what is known and not known, as well as any key underlying concepts, theories or paradigms; a discussion of the broader implications of the project, e.g. "Why does this matter in a societal context?"
 - Approach including the relevant marine science topics that will be explored; how the marine science will be integrated into natural resource management, policy, law, business, education, or other areas; any specific proposed activities
 - Product(s) including specific requirements for successful completion of each product. Each product description should include expected components, content, and other criteria (e.g., report length, format, etc.) This section should be specific and detailed but respect the credits associated with the Capstone project (6). This section should also include a plan for dissemination of the products, which can be a website, targeted distribution of information to stakeholders, inclusion in W&M ScholarWorks, or other similar ideas. Given the short tenure of M.A. students, publications should not be included as a product. However, students can pursue publication of products after the degree is complete.

- If necessary, the products can be formally amended during the course of the project by mutual agreement of the student, Capstone Advisor(s), professional mentor, and M.A. program director.
- At the conclusion of the Capstone course, students will turn in their finished Capstone products and give a 20-minute presentation to VIMS community about their work
- Final grades will be assigned by the Capstone Advisor(s) in collaboration with the professional mentor and will be based on successful completion of the Capstone products (as outlined in the Capstone prospectus) and quality of the prospectus and final presentation.
- The capstone course will be graded as pass/fail. If significant changes to the submitted project are required, but revisions cannot be completed by the time grades are due for the semester, an Incomplete (I) may be assigned. The student will normally have one semester to complete revisions. A student must pass the capstone course to receive the degree. If a student does not pass the required capstone, the student will have one additional opportunity to pass the capstone. If the student does not pass the capstone in the second attempt, the student will be dismissed from the program.