

# **Multidisciplinary Approaches to Culminating Student Experiences**

Edited by

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**Series in Education**



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# Introduction

Michael G. Strawser

*University of Central Florida*

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“Back in my day...”

More often than not Michael finds himself either living vicariously through his students or thinking deeply about the differences in their college experiences. He went to a small private university and completed a required senior research project as his ‘culminating undergraduate experience’, finishing his undergraduate degree in 2008. He then went on to his master’s where he completed a thesis because he thought he might want to then go on and earn a Ph.D. He could have opted for comprehensive exams but was strongly urged to complete the typical thesis project. He was the student that needed, craved even, something different.

Robin also completed a research project, albeit much earlier than Michael, as a culminating experience for the psychology honors program at Temple University where she went as an undergraduate. Early in college, she knew she wanted to be a professor and she also enjoyed being challenged intellectually. She had to interview a few faculty in the department until she finally found one willing to work with her and whose work on intellectual development dovetailed with her own interests. She was delighted to be a part of weekly research team meetings where the level of discourse, including discussions on Piaget and Kant, was mind-blowing to her.

Both Michael and Robin were fortunate to have such high-quality research experiences. Such high-impact experiences became more popular as Kuh (2008) and others identified the significant benefits of real-world interactions and complex problem-solving for students. Culminating projects, those end-of-degree or end-of-school showcases or practical experiences, had been a staple in K-12 education and have gradually become more common at many universities. As such opportunities grow in popularity, more students are able to participate in valuable experiential learning. At the same time, however, the challenges for students to complete such projects have become more apparent.

Robin has been a faculty internship supervisor in the field of Human Development and Family Studies for about nine years and a professor for over

30. Observations she has made during the last few years along with some previously existing misgivings she had about the fundamental fairness of requiring full-time internships cemented the understanding that flexibility regarding culminating experiences is crucial from a social justice perspective as well as a practical matter.

Discussions with colleagues centered on what internships were really about and how they may not have been serving all students equally and fairly. What about those students who had to work a full-time job on top of an unpaid, full-time internship? What about the low- or no-paid internships that the students in human service agencies had compared with the well-compensated internships that business students had? What about the, thankfully rare, instances where interns were brought on board by companies or organizations which were merely aiming to avoid paying a full-time employee? What about when a student intern was employed doing menial tasks such as doing laundry and cleaning storage areas for an internship site? How much choice did a student intern have when an internship turned out not to be as planned or when a supervisor decided not to engage the intern in a meaningful experience? What if an internship site had colleagues who were hostile to interns working towards a degree when they themselves were in low-paying jobs with few prospects? How could we ensure that a student moved beyond stereotypes and biases that were well-ingrained about their clients and co-workers? What about when an internship site refused to take on a particular intern who was neuro-atypical?

In the past, we may have assumed that the mere existence of an internship was a panacea for moving the student beyond the classroom. Assumptions about internships and other culminating experiences need to be questioned. Understanding what students need and how they can achieve that must be at the forefront of the decisions made at institutional and program levels. Maximizing flexibility and tailoring culminating experiences to the individual student is paramount.

Recognizing that traditional theses and other written projects may not always be the most practical and applicable option for some students and being creative to move beyond these are challenges that we lay out for you as you read this volume. Understanding that there are myriad options, with benefits and costs to each, is a fundamental responsibility of the faculty advisor, academic program faculty, and institutional leaders. While few seem to question whether the role of the academy is to provide a training ground for future jobs or more as a fertile ground for developing critical thinking and creative accomplishments, this age-old debate comes to the forefront. Recognizing the importance of articulating programmatic goals embedded within the institutional values and objectives, assumptions must be challenged, and the status quo questioned.

This volume provides much food for thought as we move forward into a new “normal” for higher education institutions.

Despite the relatively recent popularity of culminating experiences, a multidisciplinary and practical resource that provides information for all types of culminating student experiences is not yet available. The idea for this volume arose because of the recognition that a holistic and applied resource for those looking to have general knowledge of different ways to assess student learning, especially at the undergraduate level, was lacking. This text seeks to fill a gap and provide a historical context for culminating experiences, suggestions for assessment, foundational knowledge for different types of projects, and finally approaches to using these experiences in various disciplines. Because of the information desired, experts in their field from a wide variety of disciplines were approached to be chapter contributors. This resource focuses predominantly on undergraduate students but many of the chapters can either be applied to both undergraduate and graduate students (e.g., thesis) or specifically focus on the graduate student population (e.g., dissertation).

The book is divided into three sections. The first section provides background information on experiences including definitions, assessment techniques, and valuable information related to student reflection. The second section includes chapters that dive deeply into various experience types including thesis, dissertation, applied projects, comprehensive exams, portfolios, and internships. This list is not exhaustive but representative of some of the more sought-after experiences. The third section focuses on different disciplines, specifically business, humanities, natural and applied sciences, and social sciences. These chapters are discipline-specific, providing information for readers on how to infuse culminating experiences at a programmatic and departmental level. For ease, chapter summaries are provided below.

## **Chapter Summaries**

### **Chapter 1: Defining Culminating Experiences**

The first chapter in this volume, authored by Lindsay M. McCluskey, sets the stage for the remainder of the text by providing definitions of and a contextual background for culminating experiences in higher education. McCluskey weaves together definitions by high-impact practice scholars while providing a holistic rationale for the importance of culminating experiences in university settings.

### **Chapter 2: Assessing Culminating Experiences: Balancing Rigor and Flexibility in the Design and Delivery of a Capstone Experience**

Chapter Two, by Patricia Payette and Nisha Gupta, focuses on assessing culminating experiences. Their combined expertise, revealed in part by leading

a large university Quality Enhancement Project aimed at enhancing culminating experiences for undergraduate students, provides a rare and unique perspective on demonstrating effectiveness in culminating experiences. Payette and Gupta build an argument based on the importance of assessment before diving into their institutional context. Their assessment resources are also invaluable and can be used as multidisciplinary resources across programs and departments.

### **Chapter 3: Student Reflection**

In Chapter Three, Andrea Hamilton and Susan Wildermuth provide needed insight on student reflection as a means of encouraging deep learning as a result of culminating projects. Hamilton and Wildermuth not only provide a helpful historical context of student reflection as an instructional strategy but also establish reflection as a necessary way for students to debrief their culminating projects. Their rationale for incorporating reflection and their strategies for assessing reflection can be applied to varying degrees with undergraduate or graduate students.

### **Chapter 4: Thesis**

Amanda Martinez, in Chapter Four, transitions the volume from general culminating approaches to a more detailed explanation of individual experiences. Martinez approaches the thesis from the perspective primarily of undergraduate students; however, much of the information explored could be applied at the graduate level. After defining the merits of a thesis, Martinez transitions to effective thesis writing, a section helpful not just for advisors or instructors but students as well. Helpful advice is offered to advisors as they are encouraged to be consistently attentive to student needs throughout the process.

### **Chapter 5: Dissertation**

In a chapter unique to graduate populations, by Karen Head, Kevin Dvorak, Shirley O'Brien, and Russell Carpenter, exceptionally practical advice is granted from seasoned doctoral advisors. The authors do well to position the dissertations as a necessary manifestation of research while also positioning a framework for student-centered dissertation advising and writing.

### **Chapter 6: Applied Projects**

Chapter Six, dovetailing with more traditional culminating experiences of thesis and dissertation, details a more recent conceptualization and applied projects. Ahmet Aksoy and Amber McCord use a 'next journey' analogy to discuss the value of applied projects and experiential learning. They also provide a solid rationale for why instructors, program directors, and future employers cannot ignore applied projects. To finish their chapter, they provide

practical templates to help instructors or advisors track, manage, and ultimately assess applied projects.

### **Chapter 7: Comprehensive Exams**

Cassandra L. Carlson-Hill and Danielle Johnson discuss an oft-overlooked approach to determining student mastery. Qualifying exams show student readiness to either enter the workforce or move on to a terminal degree or further research. This chapter offers expertise related to navigating the exam journey while effectively advising students through the process. They provide a rationale for why comprehensive exams can be beneficial and applicable for all programs, and identify best practices for effectively incorporating qualifying exams including diligently focusing on the role of the advisor.

### **Chapter 8: Portfolios**

Kathleen J. Kennedy, author of chapter eight, dutifully explores portfolios as a valuable culminating experience for students. In this chapter, Kennedy provides practical suggestions for using portfolios, a versatile and effective tool to assess student learning. Portfolios allow students to not just collect and categorize their deliverables but also showcase these creations for future employers. An engaging exercise, portfolios can be helpful for all students, especially those in creative disciplines. Kennedy's chapter provides a rationale for why instructors should consider portfolios as a culminating tool and provides examples of integral and strategic student portfolios.

### **Chapter 9: Internships**

Chapter nine delves into one of the more experiential culminating activities, the internship. Amanda Joyce shows how internships provide unparalleled opportunities for students to apply knowledge gained during their program. In addition, this chapter explores not only the benefits of internships but gives detailed suggestions for creating a collaborative and engaging internship program for undergraduate students. This chapter is also the final chapter that highlights a specific project or culminating experience.

### **Chapter 10: Business**

Amanda Main begins what is in essence the third and final section of this volume. Main focuses on the culminating experience as a useful evaluative tool for business programs. By providing information related to competency-based programming, faculty-student research collaborations, industry-sponsored projects, and internships, Main discusses how business programs can incorporate strategic student experiences to enhance the learning journey. An example project template is provided to help apply the shared principles.

**Chapter 11: Humanities**

In chapter eleven, the authors contextualize culminating approaches in the humanities. The authors, Javier Alvarez Jaimes and Sharrah A. Lane, apply expertise surrounding the study of human culture and society. The humanities, those academic programs that focus on ideas, stories, words, symbols and expressions, are well suited for project-based learning that showcases student work and individual thought. Jaimes and Lane differentiate between culminating concepts, like service learning, independent studies, and others and provide information for humanities instructors looking to build effective end-of-study experiences.

**Chapter 12: Natural and Applied Sciences**

Because of the sheer breadth of disciplines encompassed in the natural and applied sciences, Jacob Moore had a difficult task. Yet, Moore approaches culminating experiences at both the undergraduate and graduate levels in the natural and applied sciences with dutiful grace. Moore first provides a definitional context of natural sciences as well as applied sciences and then provides a rationale for various educational goals in these disciplines. The remainder of the chapter incorporates an overview of capstone experiences in natural sciences, engineering and computer sciences, agricultural sciences, and even medicine.

**Chapter 13: Social Sciences**

The final chapter, chapter thirteen, is devoted to the social sciences. Nikki DiGregorio, Amanda J. Rich, and Laura Evans begin by framing their suggestions around several educational frameworks including transformative learning, self-efficacy, and experiential learning. With these frameworks serving as the baseline foundation for their suggestions, the authors then move into a direct application of these theories as conduits for learning through culminating experiences. The authors bring the volume full circle by sharing insight into using critical reflection in social science projects and share suggestions for assessing culminating experiences in the social sciences.

Culminating student experiences can be valuable projects for students to both display and apply their knowledge. Resources like this one, which is instructor-centered, practical, and digestible, can help inexperienced instructors navigate the culminating experience for the first time and can be helpful for seasoned instructors to find unique ideas for in-depth instruction and assessment.

# **Section 1: Culminating Experiences in Higher Education**

Section 1 includes three chapters that all focus on culminating experiences in higher education. The section provides foundational information and a unifying baseline for culminating experiences. These first three chapters offer context for the rest of the volume by defining culminating experiences, discussing assessment, and offering a perspective on student reflection as a valuable and necessary component of these culminating experiences.

While we recognize there are unique circumstances that may alter one's view of what constitutes a culminating experience, the high-impact framework for defining culminating experiences, used by McCluskey in the first chapter, presents a unifying mantra for educators that reverberates throughout the entire volume. The second chapter about assessment, by Payette and Gupta, builds on the high-impact goal and presents a specific institutional example that is used to provide exemplar assessment resources that can be used to evaluate culminating experiences in multidisciplinary contexts. The third and final chapter in this section describes a student-centered approach to reflection. Hamilton and Wildermuth offer strategic and practical ideas for incorporating reflection into high-impact culminating experiences.

Taken together, these chapters offer a historical and philosophical foundation for educators to consider when incorporating culminating experiences into their multidisciplinary programs.

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