

**Assessment of Spring 2016 Cultural Studies Capstone Papers:
Results and Post-scoring Panel Conversation
Prepared by Sean Johnson Andrews, HHSS Assessment Coordinator
With Nicole Spigner and Michelle Yates**

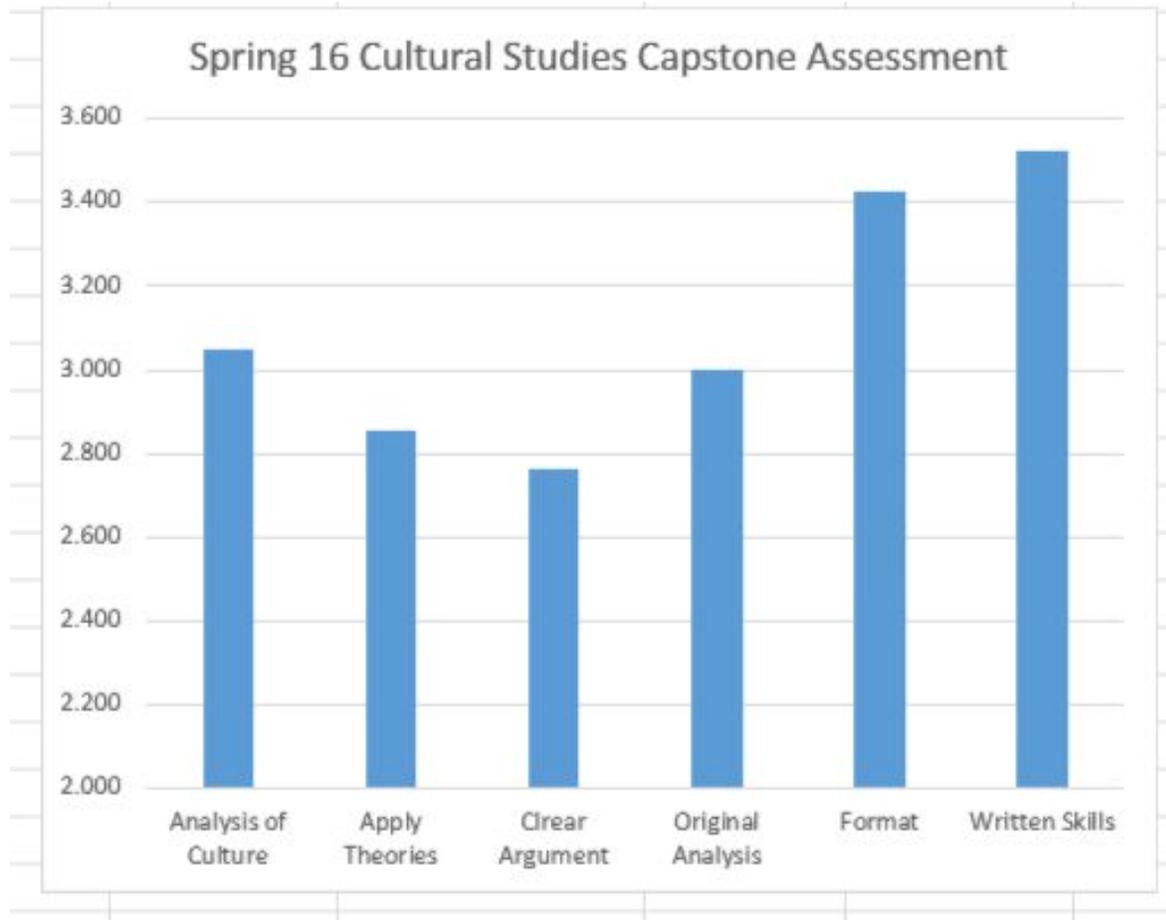
In September and October of 2016, three faculty affiliated with Cultural Studies - Sean Johnson Andrews (HHSS), Nicole Spigner (English) and Michelle Yates (HHSS) - worked with Neil Pagano (Interim Associate Provost for Accreditation and Assessment) to establish evaluation criteria and then evaluate all Cultural Studies Capstone papers from the previous spring. The purpose was to set a benchmark for future evaluations and to consider the implications these evaluations had on our curriculum. We held a norming session in late September to help establish the evaluation criteria (looking at a handful of representative samples) and then collectively ranked the papers from the previous spring.

We decided on six criteria to judge the papers:

1. Demonstrate understanding of conceptual vocabularies and methods central to the analysis of the intersection of culture with other social and material practices?
2. Apply a range of theories and terms in its analysis?
3. Present and support a clear argument using appropriate methods and scholarly sources?
4. Present an original argument/analysis?
5. Use an acceptable scholarly format (e.g., APA or MLA)?
6. Employ strong written communication skills (sentence structure, grammar, punctuation, other)?

We ranked each paper on each criteria on a scale of 1-4, with “1” being “poor,” “2” being “well,” “3” being good, and “4” being excellent. Sheet 1 of the attached Excel spreadsheet shows the averages and correlations of these rankings, as calculated by Neil Pagano. Sheet 2 shows the raw data used to establish these comparisons. The following graph illustrates the topmost evaluation of these criteria, and therefore our collective impression of the papers as a whole. We held a meeting on October 13, 2016 to discuss these findings and consider what they might suggest about the Cultural Studies curriculum going forward.

- Papers split between those that did good to excellent on major objectives (4) and those that did fair to well (3).
- Best papers demonstrated students depth of engagement with topical theories and Cultural Studies methods in previous seminars.
- We need to affirm the appropriateness of prerequisites, highlight this trajectory for students, recommend they take seminars before Capstone AND be thinking well ahead of time about the theories and methods they will take with them into Capstone.
- Advising will help - in class and one-on-one.



Overall observations:

The strongest areas are the written skills and the formatting in an appropriate scholarly method. On the former, we were not surprised because the students take the papers through multiple drafts - students produce and get feedback at least three times; capstone II is all writing and readers make many comments. Formatting is also strong, but the reviewers agreed that we were not too stringent on format; as long as it's consistent. Panel "could have been harder" on format.

We arrived at the distinction between clear argument and the creativity or originality of the analysis in the norming session. This was meant to call attention to the fact that some papers might have a very tight argument, but very boring or redundant analysis. Or they might have a lot of original analysis but struggle to have this analysis cohere into an argument they could thread throughout the paper. This distinction is reflected in the overall graph above in that few papers are good on both indexes. One paper, for instance, on nuclear apocalypse films and their relation to anti-proliferation politics, needed a great deal of tightening in terms of the argument, but took a very original approach to the analysis. Since students have the most experience throughout the major in incorporating theory and analyzing culture, these were also relatively strong, but could still be improved.

The strongest papers had relatively strong arguments, writing, and application of theories, and showed students taking risks. Readers encouraged them to try something more complex instead of taking the easy route. Students intentionally took courses that supported their work. They used diverse, significant sources - often more broadly than even reflected in the papers. The faculty familiar with the students and their coursework confirmed that these theses were rooted in theory and scholarship harvested from the depth and breadth of their learning in the major. This further affirmed the importance of scaffolding and the opportunity to take core courses (Intro, Theories, and Methods) and multiple advanced, 3000-level seminars **before** beginning capstone (or, in the new major configuration, the Practicing classes).

The weakest papers did more reporting than arguing. They not only fell short of making an argument, but lacked significant original engagement with theory and scholarly sources. This especially reflects students who did not incorporate the theory and rigor from previous seminars into their analysis. The two poorest ones were internship capstone papers, which lack formal outside readers. Also, hard to have “critical distance” from the internship location. Since this option is now being eliminated, a possible alternative is to do an internship first, ideally in the summer, or simultaneously.

Curricular conclusions:

- Scaffolding is very important – since the best papers show students incorporating the theories and concepts they have developed in earlier classes of the major, we need to highlight the role these courses play in the development of their final project.
- Prerequisites are essential for establishing this trajectory, but advising is also key, both the formal advising in terms of choosing courses (especially seminars) and the informal advising in the context of classes themselves
 - Whoever teaches Theories and Methods, needs to discuss the Capstone project to get students to think about WHY they are in Theories and Methods.
 - In the 2000-3000 level seminars we need to be more intentional and remind students about the capstone project.
- The capstone project needs to actually reflect the courses they might have taken. This major is a great step for students who are going to go on to graduate school, as the best papers illustrate.
- Capstone is and will be intellectually difficult for transfer students. The need to “squeeze” things in in two years, makes it difficult to get the range of courses - especially seminars - needed to supply the depth and breadth of theory and scholarship. Transfer and other students who change majors have less time to get a range of classes.
- This is compounded by the often limited seminar offerings in any given semester (possibly remedied by concrete two-year rotation and an announcement of advanced 3000-level seminars to be offered in the major a year or more in advance) and the fact that we currently only offer Capstone I in the fall and Capstone II in the spring. Both of these should be remedied with growth of the major, which will allow for more course offerings.