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Negotiating the Client-Based Capstone Experience

Steve Reifenberg and Sean Long
University of Notre Dame

Many graduate programs for professionals (public policy, public administration, business, international affairs, and others) use client-based experiential learning projects, often termed "capstones," in which students combine theory and practice to benefit an outside client. Increasingly, undergraduate programs use client-based capstones as well, whereby students work with a client over a semester to solve a problem. Evidence suggests that students value these experiences and clients often describe value created as well. However, evidence also suggests that both students and clients can experience a mismatch of expectations, gaps in information, misunderstandings, and frustrations in the process of working together. With the objective to enhance learning for students and create value for clients, reframing the capstone project as a "negotiation in multiple domains" rather than a "fixed problem to be solved" has potential benefits for the student, the client, and the learning process. The approach may have implications for a broad range of team-based problem-solving initiatives. This paper, using the team-based capstone experience of the "International Development in Practice" class at the University of Notre Dame, explores how an integrated negotiations approach contributes to the capstone value creation and learning experiences.

Experiential learning can help students develop knowledge, skills, and values from direct experiences outside a traditional classroom setting (Kolb, 2014; see also Kolb & Fry, 1975). The client-based capstone experience, which pairs students with clients who define a problem or opportunity they would like the students to address, is an increasingly common way to engage students in experiential learning. In the process, students can make important connections between their academic work and real-world practice, as well as assist a client with a concrete problem (Hauhart & Grahe, 2014).

However, experience suggests that the maximum benefit is often not realized due to obstacles that impact the experiential learning and value creation process. This essay explores how a limited conceptualization of these capstone projects and a mismatch of expectations, especially between students and clients, often contribute to these problems. The essay proposes that reframing the capstone project as a "negotiation in multiple domains" rather than a "fixed problem to be solved" has potential benefits for the student, the client, and the learning process (see Putnam, 1988, for discussion of multiple-level negotiations; also see Cohen, 2004). Furthermore, the essay proposes concrete strategies and tactics to put these ideas into practice.

The Capstone: Experiential Learning in an International Development Class

"Education is not preparation for life; education is life itself," stated Thomas Dewey some 100 years ago. Dewey's iconic phrase manifests itself in the theme of authentic learning, or "learning-by-doing" as a classroom environment focused on "real-world, complex problems and their solutions, using role-playing exercises, problem-based activities, case studies, and participation in virtual communities of practice" (Lombardi, 2007, p. 2). It transcends any single discipline, incorporates multiple perspectives and cultivates a culture of doing instead of just listening. In the process, students help develop a set of 'portable skills': judgment to separate reliable from unreliable information, a synthetic ability to recognize patterns in unfamiliar settings and the endurance and patience to follow an argument over a sustained timeframe without giving up (p. 3).

In many higher educational settings, "capstone" projects are increasing common ways to try to link theory and practice, as well as to integrate and synthesize learning (Hauhart, 2015, p. 43). In this article I focus on one type of capstone experience that has students work in teams to address a problem or opportunity identified by a client organization.

For the past six years I have taught a class at the University of Notre Dame called "International Development in Practice: What Works in Development." The class examines opportunities and challenges to promoting positive individual and societal change. Linking international development theory and practice, the class attempts to help students develop practical skills through experiential learning. In my international development class the capstone has evolved from students working on crafting a solution to a hypothetical problem to student teams addressing a real world problem proposed by an actual client.

When Things Do Not Work as Planned

Undergraduate teams working with real clients can face multiple challenges ranging from their lack of professional experience to unclear problem definition, from ineffective engagement of clients to miscommunication. One experience with a client brings some challenges to light.

The client wanted to understand how to bring environmental concerns more effectively into the citing of new energy projects in Chile. The client believed there was a relevant experience with the U.S. Department of Interior incorporating environmental concerns in approval of new energy projects, and the client asked students to map the most relevant U.S. cases and apply those lessons in the Chilean context.

Toward the end of the semester, the client told the team of four students that they needed to develop a succinct executive summary: "You need to realize your three-page executive summary is going to busy policy makers," he told them, "so put everything you have to say in this three-page summary."

The students followed the clients' advice explicitly and confidently submitted to their client a carefully prepared 40-page report, complete with the requested three-page executive summary. To their great surprise, the students received the following note from their client:

> I am reading your report with great interest. However, I highly recommend that you get someone who is a top-notch writer and a native speaker of English to review the executive summary… [I]f the executive summary is awkwardly and ungrammatically phrased, many readers will dismiss it from the outset.

The team was devastated. They were all native speakers, and there were no grammatical mistakes in their executive summary. After receiving the task to compress a comprehensive report into a three-page executive summary, the team had tried to pack everything they had learned into those three pages, using tightly compacted text with small margins.

Clearly, the client did not want the whole report in three pages. Rather, the client wanted a concise overview that communicated the project's key ideas and convinced policymakers to read the entire document. With that recognition, the student rewrote their executive summary, and both the client and student team were satisfied with the final outcome.

In some ways this is an obvious example of a client-consultant misunderstanding. The students had neither the experience nor the confidence to explore why the client wanted "everything" in the three-page summary. The students had focused exclusively on what the client had said. In the language of negotiations, they had tried to meet the client's "position" rather than understanding what the client really cared about or "interests" (Fisher, Ury, & Patton, 1992).

Teaching students about negotiations has become a major theme of my international development course. However, as we explored the role of negotiations in the client relationships, it became increasingly clear that focusing solely on the negotiation between client and student team is insufficient. There are at least five critical negotiated arenas in a client-based capstone project: 1) instructor with the client, 2) instructor with students, 3) students with the client, 4) students with others who are not the client, and 5) students with their teammates.

This essay tries to explicitly map these negotiated relationships and provide some recommendations for effective analysis and management of each. This multi-party negotiation framework has the potential to transform the conception of the capstone process and create additional value for students and clients alike.

Negotiations and the "Development Advisory Team"

As part of my class, groups of three to six students, called Development Advisory Teams (DAT), are paired with professional development organizations searching to address an organizational or programmatic challenge or opportunity. Student teams serve as consultants on a problem or opportunity defined by a development "client," working in countries across Asia, Africa, or Latin America. Over the past four years, 42 student teams have advised 17 different organizations across four continents.

Typically, clients have a challenge or opportunity and are interested in learning what other organizations have done elsewhere. Our clients' interests ranged from promoting opportunities for employees with disabilities in Bangladesh to building an ethical leadership institute for the next generation of political leaders in Argentina. While students have input into the DAT project they will be assigned, they have little control over the initial definition of the problem or opportunity, as this is determined by their client. Afterwards, however, students have great freedom to negotiate and influence how best to address the problem presented as they try to create something of value for the client.

The end product for the client might do a few things: share "best practices" or lessons from other organizations or countries, provide insights to the issue defined by the client, and recommend options and/or a concrete path forward. As a former student reflected after consulting a client for Catholic Relief Services on how to strengthen health systems in Zambia, the DAT served as a "creative additive for a nebulous concept." In some cases, the DAT gives the client a fresh perspective to confront a stale problem.

As part of the course I teach a number of units on negotiation theory and apply that theory to a series of simulation exercises, applying the language and tools of negotiation skills to the client project. A central text I use in teaching negotiations is Roger Fisher and William Ury's *Getting to Yes: Negotiating Agreement* *without Giving In* (1992). More generally, negotiations are at the center of the international development process, whether involving a community advocating for what it cares about with a government or development organization, the tension and interface between "donor" and "beneficiary," or the successful (or flawed) implementation of any project. The process that resulted in the eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in 2000 was a negotiated outcome, framing much of the global development discussion during the past 15 years. The process to develop the post-2015 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) involved complex negotiations that prioritized certain issues while excluding others. For example, climate change—not explicitly included in the earlier MDGs—was fiercely negotiated and became a pillar of the SDGs.

Negotiations play a central role to achieve the course objectives: as a process to bring about change, as a lever to expand opportunities, and as a skill one can practice and improve (Fisher, Ury & Patton, 1992; see also Raiffa, 1985; Ury, 1991). Overall, the class explores the centrality of negotiations in every aspect of international development, both as a meta-framework and also as a part of the skill-building process for students. Students are exposed to the diverse perceptions, needs, and constraints of those one encounters in a professional setting, such as community members, colleagues, and clients.

Exploring Other Client-Based Capstone Experiences and Evaluations

Two formal evaluations, from client-based capstone programs at New York University and Binghamton University, as well as an informal evaluation at Yale University, provide relevant insights. Yale University's Global Affairs major, an application-only major that admitted its first group of students in Spring 2011, offers perhaps the closest case study to the model used in my course ("Global Affairs Major," 2015). Seniors in the Global Affairs major must take a semester-long capstone course where they work with eight to ten classmates on a public policy project on behalf of a client ranging from a government agency in the U.S. to an NGO abroad ("Capstone Programs," 2015). The first class of Global Affairs seniors completed the capstone course in Fall 2012, and a review cited "mixed" experiences with the client-based project (Menton, 2013). Clients were largely enthusiastic; one stated, "They brought really fresh perspectives to things we see every day, which was really exciting for us." Yale's Director of Undergraduate Studies noted, "One of the comments we heard more than once from clients was how impressed they were with the depth of analysis that translated into specific policy recommendations" (Menton, 2013).

Some students, however, expressed frustration with the process, encountering problems of scope, clarity, and drift. "I think we learned a lot in the end, but I think some people were disappointed," one student remarked (Menton, 2013). It was clear that the capstone exposed students to the excitement and frustration that accompany working with a real-world client.

The experience with Yale's Global Affairs major reveals four tendencies of client-based capstone courses. First, students' experiences vary significantly depending on the client. Second, students without a constant stream of communication felt "aimless" while working on the project. Third, some felt the instructions were too vague and the scope of the project too large for unspecialized undergraduate students. Finally, as one student stated, "We wanted the project to be helpful to [our client], but I don't think we felt that at the end" (Menton, 2013).

An analysis of the capstone experience at New York University's Robert F. Wagner Graduate School of Public Service (NYU Wagner) provided additional lessons for the course design. Schachter and Schwartz (2009) surveyed 42 previous client agencies to determine whether NYU Wagner's Capstone program was helpful not only to the students, but also to participating clients (p. 448). NYU Wagner's Capstone program was more than a decade old when evaluated for impact, in total serving over 2,600 students and 400 organizations. Schachter and Schwartz discuss four ways to improve capstone outcomes. The first is to encourage concrete deliverables: "Projects for which teams developed or acquired specific tools and resources had significantly higher ratings compared to those that did not," they write (p. 454). The faculty manager should signal this in the client selection process, and it is beneficial to stress this to students throughout the project. Second, recommendations should be scaled to the agency's reality. Schachter and Schwartz note, "Any recommendations made to clients need to take into account the unique realities of the participating agencies" (p. 454). The third is a focus on administrative communication with the client; as most client organizations have little to no experience with students, it is important to "increase the level of communication between administration and clients throughout the year" (p. 455). Finally, unexpected things transpire, and simply, life happens:

> Data may not be readily available, the scope of a project may become unworkable, hidden agendas may arise that shift the nature and tone of the project, a key stakeholder may interrupt the progress of the work, or deeply considered recommendations may not be well-received.

> Dilemmas like these are to be expected. What the students choose to do with these challenges can influence not only their learning, but also their ability to deliver a viable end product to their client. We want to encourage our students to face these challenges among themselves and with the client, rather than avoid them (p. 455).

As the development economist Albert Hirschman (1967) wrote nearly 50 years earlier, "All projects are problem ridden; the only valid distinction appears to be between those that are more or less successful in overcoming their troubles and those that are not" (p. 27).

Campbell and Lambright (2011) take these reflections a step further and analyze the specific factors that "influence the extent to which [clients] benefit from their capstone experience" during an MPA Capstone program at Binghamton University (p. 62). While designed for the local community rather than international organizations, the project nonetheless provides an informative quantitative analysis of what leads to positive capstone outcomes. The most successful projects focused primarily on the client, involved supervisors in both project design and the final product, and were prioritized by a client organization that clearly understood the course expectations and regularly communicated with the students.

Supervisor engagement and faculty contact were a bellwether of successful, and unsuccessful, projects. Common problems that led supervisors to become less engaged in the project included unclear expectations and definitions of their own roles, and disconnect between faculty members and supervisors (Campbell & Lambright, 2011, p. 19). Interestingly, Campbell and Lambright conclude that the "caliber of the process," not the students, is the best indicator of project success. They state, "[T]he value of capstone projects…depends more on the project process…than on the attributes of the students" (p. 79). Careful analysis of these capstone experiences provides an opportunity to explore ways to improve the "caliber of the process."

Negotiations Analysis Can Improve the "Caliber of the Process"

Enhancing the "caliber of the process" requires effective communications and negotiations at multiple levels. Faculty and students attentive to these multiple levels and effective at negotiating them will more likely produce a successful project. For example, students working to understand a client's interests, to shape possible paths that respond to those interests, and to elicit feedback on the best path forward can all influence a client's expectations and further engage a client in the process.

A number of client-based graduate courses cite the importance of the negotiation between student and client. Georgetown University's Human Development Program notes the "student's responsibility…to work with the client…and negotiate the terms of reference" are essential ("Global Human Development," 2014). The University of Illinois at Chicago's Urban and Public Affairs Program asks all teams "to develop and negotiate a scope of work agreement with the capstone client organization" ("University of Illinois," 2015). The Master's in Public Policy Capstone at George Washington University's Trachtenberg School requires students to work with "professors/advisors to negotiate appropriate client expectations" (Adams & Brooks, 2014). Finally, the client-based capstone at New York University's Wagner School of Public Service states, "All teams will develop and negotiate a scope-of-work agreement with their client once their proposal has been selected" (NYU Wagner Capstone Proposal Guidelines, 2016, p. 5).

Although negotiations are often referred to as an important part of the capstone, rarely is there an explicit focus on the multiple negotiated relationships, nor explicit suggestions for how effective negotiations might contribute to a successful outcome. What follows are strategies and tactics to make more effective the five domains of negotiations one will encounter during the capstone experience: instructor with the client, instructor with students, students with the client, students with others who are not the clients, and students with their teammates.

1) Negotiations – Instructor with Client

The instructor (or a university administrator) typically has the first contact with the potential client, establishing a relationship, framing the opportunity, and eliciting from the client an outline of a proposal. The proposal includes some background on the problem or opportunity and first steps for getting more information.

This interaction between instructor and client is a critical first negotiation that sets the tone, expectations, and timing of the project. This negotiation helps clients understand what the capstone project is (an opportunity for systematic research and new thinking on a problem or opportunity with a concrete deliverable) and what it is not (an internship where students respond to whatever needs to be done at any particular moment). In my class, the fact that in a couple of cases the clients were former students who had experienced the capstone project themselves made this negotiation significantly easier.

Asking the client to answer three questions is particularly helpful to establish guidelines for what a successful project looks like:

a) Is there an important problem or opportunity that, in the day-to-day operations, there is not the necessary time and/or bandwidth to research and examine systematically?

A good potential client recognizes that there is more experience out there than they have accessed, and that a careful, systematic analysis of that information could helpfully inform some future decision.

b) Is there at least one person in the organization sufficiently interested in the problem to spend the time and energy to assist students to produce a good product?

While getting buy-in from senior leadership in the organization is important, the likelihood of success diminishes significantly unless there is a point person committed to interact with the students. (Over the semester there may well be multiple levels of negotiations within the client organization, including between the leadership level and the point person interacting with the student team.)

c) Is there a clear deliverable that the client hopes to see at the end of the semester?

Clients that have a clearly defined deliverable, acknowledging that it may well evolve over the semester, will more likely have a successful experience. Ideally, the client is able to define "what success looks like at the end of the project."

It is important to establish a timeline and a mutually agreed upon framework to guide the process. To avoid the natural tendency to only communicate at the beginning and end of the project, the client point person should commit to a regular communication schedule with the student team. (In the case of my class this is every few weeks—or a minimum of four times during the semester.)

Further, when negotiating a set of realistic expectations, clients need to recognize that it is difficult for undergraduate students halfway around the world to tell an international development organization what to do. The gap in relevant experience, expertise, and local knowledge is enormous. That said, it is quite reasonable to expect a group of motivated student researchers to explore the relevant literature, determine best practices, interview other organizations, provide insights, and explore potential pathways to a solution.

BRAC, one of the largest and most sophisticated development organizations in the world, brings together the poorest people in the poorest countries to learn how to read, think for themselves, pool their resources, and start their own businesses. Originally founded in Bangladesh, BRAC has an entire program devoted to empowering people with disabilities. However, the organization lacked its own internal policy for hiring or accommodating people with disabilities. BRAC has been a client since 2012, and it sought input to create new internal employment policies for hiring people with disabilities. It was not realistic to expect a student team to develop these polices for BRAC, but the client and instructor encouraged students to identify organizations that responded to similar challenges in creative and effective ways. Drawing lessons from "best practices" ranging from an international organization to a center for disabilities in Bangladesh to a technology firm in India proved useful to BRAC. As the BRAC representative wrote in the final evaluation, "They were able to accurately assess the nature and state of BRAC's current work and focus on both analyzing and helping us learn about other organizations (both Bangladeshi and international) whom BRAC can learn from, partner with, and hire/ask for expert assistance."

In the negotiation with instructor and client, there needs to be an ability to define a concrete product desired: "what success looks like." If the client cannot define what value he or she hopes to achieve at the end of the process, it is best not to engage that client. In my experience, the least successful projects have been those in which the project was considered a favor to the instructor or an attempt to "help" a group of students. The more clearly the client defines something they really want done, the more likely the capstone will be successful.

2) Negotiations – Instructor with Students

A second domain is when the instructor and students negotiate expectations. I explicitly try to build my courses around the idea of having students think like creative and effective international development professionals. We explore ideas from disciplines such as economics, political science, sociology, law, global health, and anthropology, as well as the means by which rigorous studies from those disciplines contribute to what real-world professionals do to confront complex development problems.

"Just as if you were a professional at a job, I expect you to come to every class prepared and ready to work," the syllabus states. I reinforce these expectations the first day of class, especially in relation to the capstone. I tell students:

> Most of these DAT clients are professional relationships I have developed over many years and that I value deeply. You need to be prepared to work for these clients as part of a high functioning team and demonstrate how you can contribute to an important problem. Your very first

> communication with your client is a negotiation. At the end of that conversation, does your client think 'OK, I'm going to try to help this group of students,' or, 'Wow, these students may really create something of value for me?' The foundation for success of your project is built on that first negotiation – and there are important ways you can prepare for that first negotiation by being well informed about the organization and the issues it faces before your first discussion.

Students learn a fundamental aspect of the negotiation dynamic: their instructor's interest to maintain a good working relationship with the client for personal and institutional reasons.

At the beginning of the semester, students receive information on all the projects (typically 7–10 each semester for a class of 40 students). These one-page documents on each project provide a brief background on the organizations, definition of the problem, first steps, and "what success looks like."

Students then "bid" on at least three projects, explaining in writing their interests and what skills they might bring to the project. I tell students they are negotiating with me; the more effective they make the case for their first choice, the more likely they will be successful. Given the range of interests and projects, I can almost always place students in one of their three top choices. Teams are generally three to five students each—large enough to have some diversity of skills and backgrounds, but small enough to be manageable.

I am clear that the DAT is a major part of the grade for the class, with students' grades primarily based on three factors: the client's evaluation of how well students have met the clients' interests, a peer evaluation from their team members, and a self-evaluation. I conduct peer and self-evaluations at a mid-point in the semester and again at the end of the semester. Students score each other's contributions on a 1–10 scale, as well as provide a brief narrative, based on how effectively their peers contributed to their project. They then score themselves on the same scale. The only requirement is that they cannot give everyone on the team the same score.

Once students are assigned a team, they need to learn quickly as much as they can about the organization and issue before their first communication with their client. Typically, there is a ten-day period between group formation and initial client contact. Learning from previous years, I now recommend that students get together over a meal or other informal setting to discover each other's interests, strengths, and motivations before launching into the project. Preparation is key to a successful project, and I encourage students not to contact the client until their Development Advisory Team is well prepared. Throughout the semester I remain engaged with the student teams, serving as a resource and sounding board as they engage with their key negotiation partner: their client.

3) Negotiations – Students with Client

Students understand that the client relationship is their primary focus and central negotiation. Students need to do their homework on the organization and on issues before the first client interaction: What is the context? What does academic literature say? Who else is working in the field? How is the client likely to see these issues? Why did the client likely frame the issue statement the way they did?

Prior to their first interaction with the client, students also produce a "Development Advisory Team Consulting Brochure" for the client. The brochure includes relevant information and a photo of each student on the team, highlighting any relevant background or skills, such as language and quantitative skills, or experience in the field.

What follows is my co-author's experience with, frustrations about, and insights from the capstone experience as a student in the class, especially related to the negotiations with his client:

> Our three-member Development Advisory Team worked with the Education Division of a large development organization in Latin America that sought help in developing a new communication strategy. The most difficult aspect was determining what problem to tackle. Although the client had defined a specific opportunity—"how to most effectively communicate to audiences in Latin America about our work"—there were dozens of different paths one could take. In nearly all previous college projects, the professor defined a question for the student to answer. However, this project required one to first articulate the question before answering it. If the project's scope was too narrow, one might not be able to meet the client's overarching interests. Meanwhile, a project too broad and ambitious would be unmanageable.

It proved deceptively difficult to negotiate the project's scope. In opening negotiations with the client, the team was pleased to narrow the problem scope to communication with just one audience: policymakers. Thinking the scope was sufficiently narrow, the team soon realized how many questions remained: Would the team evaluate communication strategies for policymakers in all of the client's twenty-six countries, which ranged from Haiti to Chile? Should the team focus on low, medium or high budget interventions? Finally, and since the audience "policymakers" is in itself a broadly defined group that includes Ministry of

Education officials, lawmakers and many others, which policymakers did the team want to target? After the second Skype meeting, the team thought it had identified an appropriate scope: evaluating a low, medium, and high-budget communication strategy to reach policymakers. Unfortunately, due in part to both naiveté and the client's perception of the time the team could devote to the project, the project "question" still proved too large to fully answer.

A central insight for students is to understand that they can, in fact, influence the "caliber of the process." They are not merely passive actors, receiving a fixed script that defines a problem at the beginning of the semester with the hope to present an acceptable answer to their client at the end of the semester.

Student teams need to view the clients' initial definition of the problem and proposed outcome as something evolving rather than fixed. Even with a clearly defined problem statement, students must nonetheless probe the client for additional information from an early stage that will shape the most useful product for the client.

In the student-client negotiation, students must learn when to listen and when to direct the conversation. I encourage them to probe the client to get a better sense of why the client has proposed a particular project and scope, and as time goes on, seek guidance on potential paths forward. Students typically specialize as they delve deeper into the project, becoming "experts" in a given area of the project. Students simultaneously negotiate with team members what information to emphasize and share with the client, as well as define possible paths forward. As students wade deeper into the project, they should recognize that they will likely know more about specific areas (particularly of comparative case studies in other countries) than their client. Students need to frame conversations not simply to share information with the client, but to explicitly propose helpful ways to narrow the scope, pull out the most salient information, explore different paths, and identify the most helpful recommendations and paths forward.

Questions emerge as students better understand the clients' interests: is the purpose primarily to find evidence to support and justify an already considered path, to refine an existing process, or to explore entirely new areas? Effective communication here is key. Recognizing that students cannot do everything, they need to identify specific areas of greatest interest to the client and focus on those.

A further issue for students is to understand the interests behind the stated position of their client. Enseña Chile, the Chilean version of Teach for America, is a DAT client that has had a consistently positive interaction working with the student team, in good part because both the client and student teams are effective in defining clear objectives. The client originally asked the student team to explore tools for more effective teaching; the student team usefully narrowed the scope to identify best practices for giving constructive feedback to new teachers.

The client ultimately implemented the recommendations for a number of reasons: "The project addressed a concrete need we had at the time," said the Enseña Chile representative. "The student team focused on quality information about what had worked at other organizations and what empirical research suggested in ways that were very practical and applicable to our situation in Chile."

"I think a huge lesson for us was in negotiating the scope of the work and clarifying objectives," wrote one DAT member who later worked for his client Enseña Chile for six months before accepting a position with the Bridgespan Group, the non-profit arm of Bain Consulting. "Those early negotiations were tremendously important for us in ultimately creating something of value for the client." Furthermore, he concluded, "My DAT experience and the lessons from negotiating with Enseña Chile played essential roles in my application and interview with Bridgespan."

It is useful to have a formal expectation that students and clients will negotiate and refine the problem scope. Client and student teams commit to communicate on a regular schedule, including a mid-semester presentation of key ideas and feedback on possible paths, providing a safety net to ensure students do not stray from the client's primary interests. For a client, with project timelines extending, for example in the fall semester, from September to December, having students present an initial draft in mid-October leads to fewer surprises in December. The best teams are proactive, clear, and explicit when communicating their assumptions and plans.

4) Negotiations – Students with Others Who Are Not the Client

To be of real service to the client, students typically need to uncover information from actors who are not the client. In the case of BRAC, the student team found general information about other organizations but needed to dig deeper into how these policies were conceptualized and implemented. To get this information, they needed to identify and contact specific individuals who had worked on similar initiatives on disabilities in India and around the globe. To their delight, once they identified the right individuals, those people were only too happy to share their experiences, both good and bad. It takes work to get to the right people, but finding someone who knows the topic first-hand within another organization can be a game-changer.

However, very often the first person that students reach within a comparative organization is not the "game-changer." Students therefore need to persuade others to help them get to the right person. Engaging actors who have no existing relationship with the client or project can be challenging, which makes it is useful to frame this challenge as a negotiation.

There are different ways a student team might frame their request in reaching out for more information. One framing is, "I am a student at the University of Notre Dame and I am hoping you can help me on my student project." A second framing is something like, "We are doing consulting work through the University of Notre Dame for organization X and were fascinated to learn of your work on Y that we believe will be of real relevance because…." The latter is a more promising approach to craft their inquiries. Making a personal link to someone in the organization can also go a long way. As a student in the middle of northern Indiana, how does one even begin to get personal contacts in a foreign country?

Students have access to wide networks of university alumni, professors, and graduate students from their countries of interest, as well as past students from the class who can often be quite helpful in identifying appropriate contacts. Again, the more effective and clear the student team is in framing what they are looking for, the more successful they are likely to be.

5) Negotiations – Students with Students

Among all the different negotiation domains, students often overlook the complexities of communication and negotiation within their own team. Some students hold explicit discussions around a process to prioritize, determine and negotiate roles, and better understand interests (their own and others). Others do this much less successfully.

I try to address the free rider problem, in which some team members coast on the contributions of others, in an explicit manner. The first essay in the course requires students to examine one dimension of their project that will likely move their collective efforts forward. For example, a team may identify four different organizations in different parts of the world dealing with a similar challenge, and each team member prepares a case study on one organization. They share and read their teammates' papers and are then asked to evaluate their own paper and those of their teammates. What was the contribution of others? How did they rate their own contribution?

As the instructor I try to create structured time for feedback loops and reflection. Workshop-type environments in which student teams share thorny problems and obstacles create an opportunity for collective problem solving and continuous learning. The self-evaluations allow students to reflect on how the project changed the ways they learn, as well as how to approach ill-defined problems and respond to setbacks. Group evaluations help to determine what makes for an effective group: Did the team choose explicit roles? Was there a culture of collaboration and clarity of responsibilities? My co-author reflects on his team's group dynamics and negotiations:

> On the final day, the class reflected on lessons learned and what each group wished it had known from the beginning. Most striking, one student commented that his teammates spoke freely about the client—including what they liked and what frustrated them—but struggled to give feedback to one another. "It's much easier to talk about the client, but it's difficult to address internal behaviors to make the group more effective," another reflected.
>
> We learned the most about our teammates toward the end of the project, when it was too late. Each member brought a completely different style and skillset to the table, with family backgrounds from three different countries. By establishing greater clarity from the outset on each other's skills and preferences, the team could have adjusted individual roles and group dynamics to help each member best contribute to the whole.
>
> One student remarked that his group members organized a team dinner at the dining hall before starting the project. It was a small act to get to know one another as individuals rather than as co-workers, establishing a personal relationship before a professional relationship. The dinner, he said, had long-lasting effects, making everyone more open to express differences and less afraid to provide constructive feedback. In our case, asking questions such as "Why did you want to be a member of this team?" or "What particular skills do you think you bring to the team?" could have improved delegation of roles and responsibilities, and even the group's direction. Instead, the group became too swept up in the project and forgot to consider the process.

The more students are aware of the role that communication and negotiations play within their team, the more successful they are likely to be.

Conclusions

Client-based capstone projects provide students an opportunity to engage with peers in experiential learning while attempting to help define and contribute to a client's real-world problem. However, students express that working with a team of students to address the needs of a real client with a complex problem raises a series of challenges. These include a mismatch of expectations between students and clients, gaps in information, misunderstandings, and frustrations in the process of working together. Helping students understand that they can thoughtfully shape and negotiate the “caliber of the process” is a critical shift in the ways they might typically approach both the problem and the process. Reframing the capstone project as a “negotiation in multiple domains” rather than a “fixed problem to be solved” can provide significant benefits for the student, the client, and the learning process.

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Raised by Congressional staffers who met working on opposite sides of the political aisle, SEAN LONG seeks to become an effective negotiator on the American political scene. Sean graduated in 2015 from the University of Notre Dame with a degree in Political Science and the Hesburgh Program in Public Service. He currently serves as a paralegal at the United States Department of Justice.

STEVE REIFENBERG is associate professor of practice and co-director of the Integration Lab of the Keough School of Global Affairs at the University of Notre Dame. His teaching and research interests in international education, international development, and negotiations build upon work carried out over more than a decade living overseas, primarily in Latin America. Among the things he most enjoys are working collaboratively with talented students like Sean Long and co-creating new classes in areas of mutual interest with groups of Notre Dame students.