

**Final Report: *Revitalizing the Senior Capstone Experience in Hispanic Studies***  
**Pedagogical Enhancement Project (PIG)**  
**Janis Be - Hispanic Studies**  
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Having recognized that the department's senior assessment model – in place long before I came to Whitman in 2008 - had become outdated, I applied for a Pedagogical Inquiry Grant and undertook a focused Pedagogical Enhancement Project. My intention, which I believe has been successfully met, was to improve the capstone experience for our seniors and as a result strengthen the quality of their thesis projects. Specifically, I aimed to expand the timeline of thesis, modify the syllabus, significantly revise the format of the oral, and improve methods of evaluative assessment of the thesis projects. Primary goals were to demystify the thesis process while enhancing student learning. My application listed the following as proposed tasks:

-curricular revision and enhancement of Hispanic Studies 490/Senior Capstone with a primary goal of demystifying the process and providing better academic support for students as they engage in specific methods and conventions of scholarly production within the field.

-significant modification the course syllabus in order to better guide and support students through all phases of the writing process.

-improve and define the role and designated responsibilities of the Language Assistant (whose job description allots 10 of 25 hours to assisting with 490 in the fall semester).

-completely restructure the outdated traditional “interrogation” or “question/answer style” of oral thesis defense in order to provide a more dynamic and interactive presentation-style format that will equip students with transferable skills in order to better prepare them to navigate the job market and to succeed in a variety of professional venues.

Each of these areas of enhancement were accomplished as I outline below.

My first step with the grant work was to assess the 490 Senior Seminar course structure that was then in place. I formed a committee composed of the graduating seniors who had completed 490 the previous fall to offer suggestions for improving the course with a focus on how to foster readiness for generating a research topic, formulating a research question, and articulating a thesis statement. The student committee then drafted a collective document outlining the challenges they faced as well as successful strategies that worked for them during the writing process. Finally, the committee created a document of “tips and tricks” which was shared with the current students of 490. This work was almost entirely student-led, I designated a point person, suggested some directives but wanted them to work independently without the influence and oversight of a professor. When their work was completed, I met with them on zoom. That conversation greatly shaped the work that I carried out over the next several months.

I modified timeline for the written thesis project in two ways. We started earlier in order to better facilitate the process of selecting an appropriate topic and formulating a viable research question. Rising seniors met at the end of their junior year (in zoom) with graduating seniors to hear their first-hand accounts of the process, to ask questions, and to be given some advice on best practices. Students then began the pre-writing process over the summer, with all but one beginning the fall semester with primary texts selected and a basic concept of what they intended to research/analyze. I then moved the final deadline and oral assessment back such that these took place two weeks after finals rather than the week before. With the added pressures of the global pandemic both of these changes were essential.

I created a syllabus that included scaffolding exercises to assist students in preparing for the (newly implemented) formal oral presentation. I invited a guest speaker to give a presentation on the art of presenting, and this took place before the independent thesis writing began. I assigned readings and videos on how to prepare an effective slide presentation and how give formal presentations. Students gave short practice presentations throughout the semester on the very elements they were expected to incorporate in the oral assessment – including a close reading and an overview of the theoretical foundations of their projects.

Despite the fact that the job description of our Language Assistant allots 10 of their 25 hours in the fall semester to assisting with 490, this position had never been codified. I wrote a job description that explicitly outlined the responsibilities of the Language Assistant and also set the limits of that position. Importantly, I expanded the narrow role they had been given before so as to go beyond merely correcting drafts and have an interactive role in mentoring student mastery of scholarly prose in Spanish. Ironically, there was no LA this year because of Covid-19. However, the Dean provided funds to hire an alumnus and this job description was used.

In my view, the most important pedagogical enhancement for 490 involved reconceiving the format of the oral component of the capstone experience. This included going from a closed session Q/A with professors (something of an interrogation format) to a formal presentation given to a diverse audience of undergraduate peers together with specialists in the field (departmental faculty). Inviting declared majors and interested students from our courses to attend oral thesis presentations served to demystify the capstone experience while exposing them to the rich variety of disciplinary perspectives evident in the senior projects. At the same time, graduating seniors gained valuable life skills in presenting specialized information to a diverse audience. The fact that a sophomore contacted me immediately following one oral presentation to enthusiastically request to declare a major in Hispanic Studies is a testament to the success of this pedagogical enhancement.

Significantly, I also radically improved the way in which the professors assess thesis projects. I created, for the first time, distinct rubrics for the written project and the oral presentation. And,

also for the first time, these rubrics included formal narrative assessment or qualitative evaluation together with quantitative rubrics. And, again for the first time, seniors received specific, detailed feedback. Whereas in the past students were merely told if they had passed/passed with distinction/not passed. This year they received a formal letter from me, modeled on the letters which Whitman faculty receive at promotion, providing a detailed summary of the evaluating committee's feedback with respect to both the written and the oral components of their thesis.

Success of the Pedagogical Inquiry Grant is measured by the fact that students' written projects were more academically rigorous than in previous years, particularly with respect to incorporating a clearly articulated theoretical framework and including close, analytical readings of the primary text/s through that theoretical lens. Especially notable, too, was how the oral presentations went far beyond merely summarizing the written projects and were conducted at a professional level. Presentations were scholarly yet accessible to a broad audience; slides were informative, concise, and visually appealing without supplanting the speaker (these were specific areas of focus throughout the semester). The feedback that one faculty member noted in their qualitative response to a specific thesis - "*the written analysis came to life....*" - could in fact be applied to each of the capstone projects.

There were a few unexpected challenges along the way, not least of which was a global pandemic. The proposal was written before the outbreak, modifications were made at the time of being rewarded the grant. Perhaps the greatest challenge for me was to not have the assistance of a Language Assistant throughout the thesis process. They play a pivotal role in working with the students on the mechanics of formal, scholarly writing. Plus, I had worked hard to codify their role only to not have a LA! I am grateful to Dean Tipton for allowing the department to hire a recent alum - and I modified the role according to their qualifications and experience. For the students, I think that physical isolation during this process proved to be challenging. My hope had been to create many opportunities for community building between the members of the cohort and between the cohort and their junior peers. But this proved difficult with the all-too-real impact of zoom fatigue, differences in time zones, etc. Geographical distance from campus also made it harder for students to access materials they needed they needed to conduct in-depth research in a relatively limited period of time.

It was highly rewarding to reevaluate, re-envision, and redesign the department's senior capstone experience. As the teaching of Hispanic Studies 490 is conducted on a rotating, voluntary basis by all tenured/tenure-track members of the department, I plan to share the resources I found as well as the results of my work with my colleagues. I would also be happy to collaborate with colleagues in other departments who wish to reassess their current capstone experience as a productive way to share the knowledge and experience gained from receipt of this Pedagogical Enhancement Grant. I believe that collaborating individually in this way would be far more effective than a CTL presentation.