Evolution of a Client-Based Forestry Capstone Course

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History

- FOR 4444 Integrated Forest Management Practicum
  - Purposes:
    - Integrative experience
    - Outcomes assessment

- Original capstone – early 1990’s
  - Projects based on a public property with artificial objectives
  - Integrative experience gained from “multi-disciplinary” teams
  - Students assigned to groups

- “Client-based” capstone implemented 1999 – present
  - Land owners and land managers solicited as clients for projects
  - Project objectives derived from client needs
  - Integrative experience gained from working on real-world problems
  - Students select groups and projects
Enrollment

- High of 57 students in 2002, Low of 13 students in 2010
- Overall Department enrollment
- Specialization of curricula – separate capstone experiences
Course structure

- Faculty -
  - Co-instructor(s)
  - Content advisors

- Reports – build toward final report
  - Client objectives (individual) 10%
  - Assessment methods (group) 5%
  - Resources assessment (group) 20%
  - Recommendations (group) 5%
  - Presentations (group/individual) 10%
  - Final mgmt report (group) 45%

- Student participation - 5%
  - Attendance at class meetings
  - Group responsibility/evaluations

- Grading -
  - Repetitive
  - Single v. multiple faculty graders
Client involvement (120+ clients served)

- **Contacts**
  - Faculty contacts
  - Student ideas
  - Referrals from former clients, students
  - Department requests

- **Filters**
  - Interest/engagement is key!
  - Relationship to student(s)
  - Property/management characteristics

- **Expectations**
  - Discuss objectives in person
  - Allow access to property
  - Availability for further contact
  - Attend presentation (optional, but rewarding)

- **Disclaimer**
  - These are student projects
Clients – public land managers

- USDA Forest Service

- State parks, forests, natural area preserves

- Municipalities
  - parks
  - watersheds
  - trails
Clients – private landowners and NGOs

- Family forests/farms
- Nature Conservancy
- Scouts
- TIMOs
Projects – land uses

- Recreation
  - Trails and campsites
  - Backcountry, developed
  - Horses, MTBs, ORVs
  - Water-based

- Cultural/historical sites
  - Identification
  - Protection
  - Interpretation
  - Public and private sites
Projects – land uses

- Timber production
  - Pine, hardwood silviculture
  - Small scale, commercial
- Rare species
- NTFPs
- Development (subdivisions)
  - Roads, trails
  - Management of commons
  - Soils, septic
  - Fire-Wise planning
- Mixed-uses
  - Forest/pasture/agriculture
  - Conservation easements
  - Wildlife, hunting & hunting leases
  - Home sites
Projects – issues encountered

- Roads and crossings
- Erosion and water quality
- Trespassing/vandalism
- Land use history (incl. mining)
- Management history
- Many others…
  - Including client objectives!
Outcomes

- Information, recommendations and reports
- Understanding of owners/managers
- Client relationships and future opportunities
Outcomes

- Student experience/transformation

- Accomplishment and pride
Challenges

- **Client-based challenges:**
  - Choosing clients carefully
    - no more family, friends, institutional representatives
    - is it needed/will it be implemented?
  - Student safety is of greater concern
    - travel and uncontrolled site dangers

- **The usual stuff:**
  - Groups/group dynamics/motivation
  - Student writing
    - structure/organization
    - focus on client, not what the group did (no travelogues)
  - Faculty involvement
    - adds to capstone experience
    - differing opinions and grading styles
    - burn out – reduced the grading load
Thoughts on the future

- **Incorporate “Reflection”**
  - Focus is on the client, but what are the students getting?

- **Service learning – extension connection**
  - Student involvement in outreach

- **Limited resource landowners**
  - Cooperate with Virginia State University

- **Cooperation with Development office**
  - Opportunity or the devil?

- **Reversal of specialized capstones**
  - Is specialization untenable in these budgetary times?